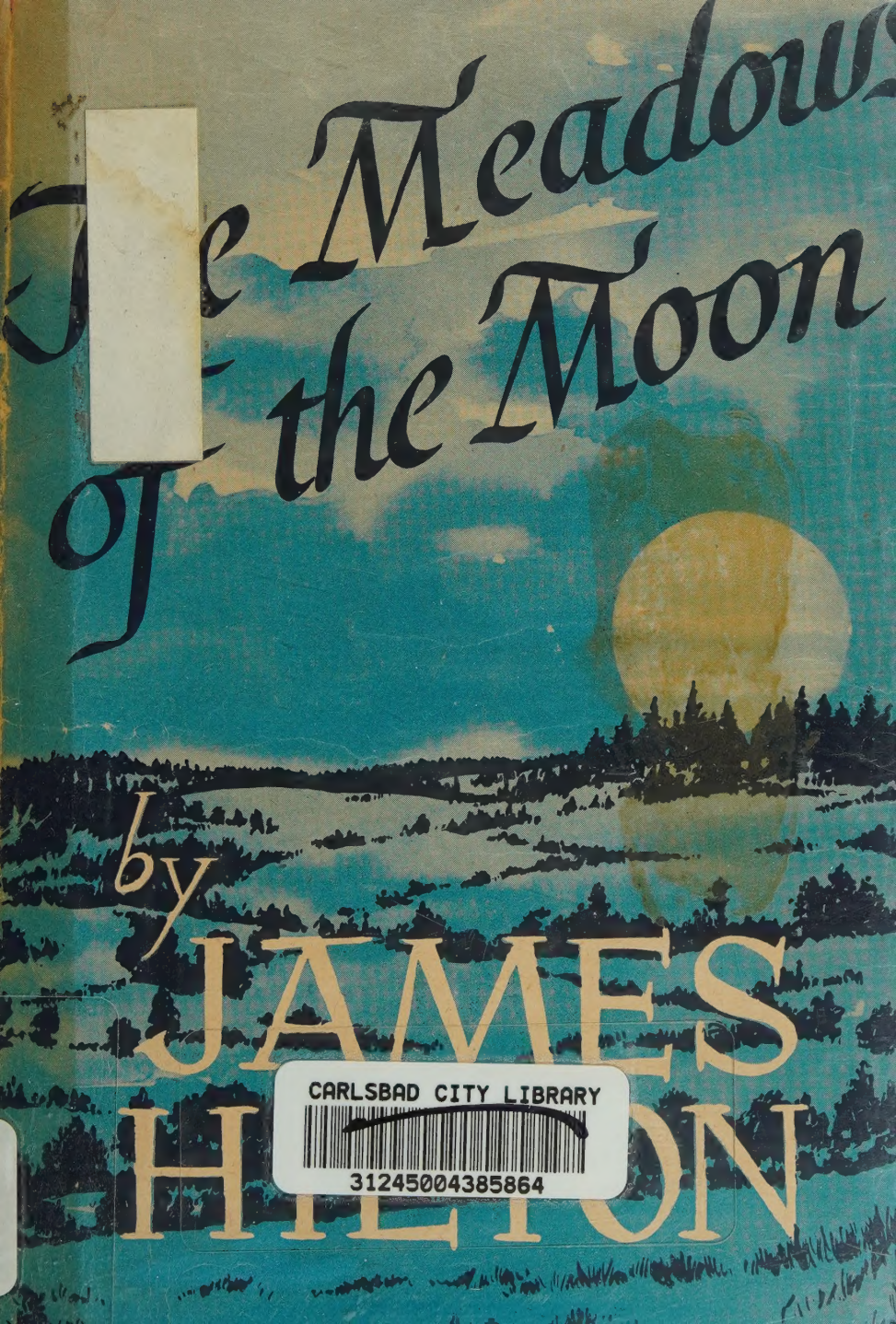

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THE MEADOWS OF THE MOON

By

JAMES HILTON

Millions of Hilton fans will welcome another book by the author of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips, Random Harvest,* and *So Well Remembered.* Originally issued just before the publisher went out of business, this book did not have the wide circulation it deserved, and copies are scarce even in libraries.

The Meadows of the Moon is the story of a young woman whose life is woven into an intricate pattern when she finds herself weighing exuberant vitality and passionate love against security and serenity.

Days spent with Michael would be exhilarating adventures, for there was nothing he hadn't tried to do — from painting pictures and being an actor, to dabbling in astrology, physical culture, and spiritualism. And also, constantly and violently, he fell in love. His brother John was as exciting as the Bank of England and just as stable. His courage was unquestioned and he was the most reasonable man on earth.

The love of Fran for both John and Michael and the dramatic and unexpected ending to the triangle, which began when as children the three played together on the open land that Michael called "The Meadows of the Moon," makes this an unusually powerful novel written in a beautiful style and with great sureness of touch.

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THE MEADOWS OF THE MOON

Books by James Hilton

LOST HORIZON

WITHOUT ARMOR

GOOD-BYE, MR. CHIPS

WE ARE NOT ALONE

RANDOM HARVEST

THE STORY OF DR. WASSELL

SO WELL REMEMBERED

THE MEADOWS OF THE MOON

BY

JAMES HILTON

BOSTON
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THE MEADOWS OF THE MOON

PROLOGUE

1

At twilight a train from London deposited a man and a little girl at Patchley station. The man was grey-haired, though tall and of soldierly bearing, and the little girl was so tired that she could hardly drag one foot after the other. In the station-yard a pair-horse landau waited, and the coachman, as soon as he saw the couple, stepped down from his perch, touched his cap, and said: "Excuse me, sir, but are you Mr. Cordeiro?"

The other answered him in perfect English, but with a slight foreign accent. "That is my name. You are from Sky Peals, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. Will you kindly step inside?"

The stranger picked up the little girl in his arms and clambered into the landau. The coachman jerked the reins, and the horses clattered noisily through the narrow and tortuous Patchley High Street, putting on extra pace when at last they reached the open road through the countryside. Meanwhile, the twilight sank into darkness, and night had completely fallen when the horses stopped at a cottage set back from the road and adjoining a pair of huge and elaborate wrought-iron gates.

Here the coachman dismounted. "The house is a short

walk through the meadows, sir," he said, pointing through the intricate pattern of the gate.

Mr. Cordeiro seemed puzzled. "But surely—" he began, as if inclined to protest, and then he said quietly: "Cannot you drive us right up to the house? I and my grand-daughter have come a long journey, and we are both very tired."

"Sorry, sir—sorry indeed—but this is as far as there's any road. There's only a footpath through the meadows. The lodge-keeper will show you the way."

And at this point the lodge-keeper appeared out of his house and began to unfasten the massive gates. Mr. Cordeiro said no more, but helped the child out of the landau and followed the keeper in silence into the meadows beyond.

The night was pitch-black, with neither starlight nor moonlight, for with sunset had come thick banks of cloud that covered the whole sky. Only a dimly reddish tint over the western horizon showed where London lay. The walk was uphill, and Mr. Cordeiro carried the girl in his arms, until after a short distance the keeper, a finely-built young fellow, asked if he should carry "little missy" himself. The other agreed, remarking upon the length and steepness of the walk.

"That's so," answered the keeper. "It's full ten minutes up to the house, and a long ten minutes in winter time and bad weather. It was old Mr. Savage that wouldn't have any road built—he was so proud of these meadows he wanted everybody coming up to the house to have to walk through 'em. When he was gettin' old, I had to wheel him all along of here in a Bath chair. Every day, that was, and any weather. . . ."

"There ought to be a road," said Mr. Cordeiro vaguely.

"Some of us hope there will be, sir," replied the other, "when the estate comes into younger hands. But Mrs. Savage isn't one to have things altered."

He broke off, as if aware that he had said enough. The rest of the walk was in silence.

2

Fifteen minutes later Mr. Cordeiro was standing in the library of Sky Peals, with his back to the huge empty fire-grate and his eyes employed in quiet, methodical observation. The girl was lying curled up in one of the leather-backed arm-chairs, fast asleep. All around the long and spacious room were shelves of volumes—several thousands of them, and more than half in a uniform binding of dark brown leather. In a further corner browsed a sleek grand piano, and in another there stood a vast mahogany pedestal-desk littered with papers. There were no pictures in the room except one over the fire-place of a fierce-looking side-whiskered man with black and sparkling eyes. A gilt tablet proclaimed him to be "John Savage."

A door opened at the far end of the room, and a woman entered, dressed as for dinner. She was, Mr. Cordeiro estimated, in her early thirties, and he was surprised, for he had expected somebody rather older. As she came beneath the sombre glow of the chandelier he noticed that she was very beautiful, with the hard clear English beauty that was so different from the types more familiar to him.

"Mrs. Savage?" he exclaimed.

She nodded. "And you are Mr. Cordeiro?" She offered her hand, and with a courtly gesture he bent over it and touched the tips of her fingers with his lips. She had expected him to shake hands merely, and the unlooked-for gallantry surprised her.

"I was wondering what time you would arrive," she said quietly, conquering her slight confusion. Then she saw the

child. She stepped towards the chair, and then, observing the child to be asleep, checked herself. "Fran, I suppose?" she whispered, softly.

Mr. Cordeiro nodded. "Yes. . . . She is very tired after the journey. We landed in Glasgow early this morning and have been travelling all the while since."

Mrs. Savage stepped to the wall by the side of the fire-place and touched a bell. "If she is so tired she shall go to bed immediately. It will be best for her. Michael is already in bed, but my elder son—John—stays up to dinner now—he is just ten years old. . . . By the way, you will join us at dinner?"

"If you will excuse my clothes, I will be delighted."

"Oh, there will only be the three of us. We have very little company. It is a pity you cannot stay for a few days, but I suppose you are far too busy, as you said in your letter."

"I am afraid so. I am due in Paris to-morrow evening."

"Yes . . . yes. . . ."

She seemed hardly to be listening to him; her eyes were on the sleeping child. And at that moment the child stirred and moved her face so that the light fell upon it.

"She is pretty," said Mr. Cordeiro, softly.

Not till the child turned her head sleepily back again did Mrs. Savage answer. Then she said slowly, and with curious intensity of utterance: "I—I—had no idea—she could be—so—so—like her father."

3

They dined sombrely in the panelled room that was somehow mellow with age and memory. Mr. Cordeiro was introduced to the boy John, and noted with approval his quiet, forceful courtesy. There was something, after all, in the English bringing-up, something that, perhaps, no other nation

quite achieved—some subtle paradox of deferential independence. As a student of racial characteristics, Mr. Cordeiro found himself interested in John.

But after dinner John shook hands and disappeared, leaving his mother to talk with the stranger alone. She led the latter into the library again, and offered him port and cigars. "If you don't feel too tired to tell me," she said, "I should like to know a few details. . . . Your letter was very short."

He sipped his wine and nodded gravely. "I thought perhaps you might read about it in the English newspapers. . . . We were travelling down the coast from Guayaquil and ran into a storm. The boat was old and nearly worn out—it simply crumpled under the heavy seas. There was hardly time to get out any of the small boats. . . . Fran and her mother were in the first one that could be launched. I never believed they would be rescued—the seas were so high. Peter and I stood in the saloon, waiting for the boat to heel over and finish us. It was then that he mentioned you. He said—'If by any chance you and Fran should be saved out of the four of us, take her to—' and then he gave me your name and address. He wrote it out on part of a cigarette-packet."

"He was quite calm?"

"Yes—the calmest on board. Some of the others were screaming like devils. . . . Then an officer came into the saloon and told us to get into one of the boats. We went on deck, and all I remember is being wedged and jostled in a dreadful crowd and finally put into a boat. I tried to keep with Peter, but I couldn't. I fancy he edged out of the crowd and went back to the saloon."

"When at last we were picked up I found my daughter and Fran again. But my daughter caught a chill from the exposure and died before we reached Callao. Thus—" he shrugged his shoulders slightly—"the contingency that Peter foreshadowed

had arisen, and so——"

She said, calmly and almost conventionally: "It was very good of you to come."

He shook his head. "Not at all. As it happened, I had to make a business journey to Europe about this time. And besides, after the tragedy I was—rather—relieved—to know what to do with—with Fran. I live a lonely life—especially now—and—and—well—Ecuador is no place for a young English girl."

"English—on one side." It was as if she were uttering her thoughts.

"And Peruvian-Spanish on the other," he rejoined, with a slight smile. "An excellent combination, I assure you."

She filled up his glass and he saw then that her hand was trembling. Suddenly she said: "Mr. Cordeiro, have you any idea—any idea at all—why your son-in-law asked you to bring —Fran—to me?"

"You and he had been great friends at one time—that was all I assumed."

"But didn't you wonder?"

He gave her a smile almost oriental in its imperturbability. "What one wonders, Mrs. Savage, is not always what one dares to ask."

"Did Peter know that my husband was dead?"

He shrugged his shoulders again. "That I cannot say. We had no time to discuss matters. Peter was not—communicative. . . ." He went on, more easily: "I am overjoyed to think that Fran will live here in your beautiful English home. Of course there will be money enough to pay for everything—I shall arrange all that. . . . I am not a poor man. . . . It is hard to leave her, but for her—for her—it is so much the best, is it not?" He waved his hand vaguely across the room. "I must look forward to seeing my grand-daughter again in per-

haps four—five—or six—years—when I visit Europe again."

She said, as if reckoning it out to herself: "Fran will be twelve then. And John will be quite a young man. . . . Just think. . . ."

But he did not think. Or perhaps to him there was nothing to think of. And after a very short and desultory conversation he was reminding her of his train at Patchley.

She rose and pressed the bell. "You must not miss your train, although it is a pity you could not have stayed. . . . The landau will be waiting for you at the lodge, but don't forget that it is a few minutes' walk from here."

"Through your meadows," he remarked. "Your meadows which everyone must pass."

Her reply startled him by its sudden wistfulness. "How did you know that? Who told you? Was it Peter?"

"No . . . only the man at the lodge who showed me the way."

In the hall, as he stooped again over her proffered hand, she said: "Fran had better take your name, Mr. Cordeiro. It will make everything—simpler. Fran Cordeiro . . . you understand——"

"I understand perfectly," he interrupted.

She looked at him then—the last time, as a matter of fact, that she ever looked at him, and she wondered if the signal achievement of his life had really been to understand perfectly, or only to pretend that he did.

The servant was waiting to conduct him to the lodge, and with a final bow he left her and went away.

4

And meanwhile Fran slept. Her room was in the corner tower, facing the east and next to the nursery, and when she

woke up in the morning the sunlight was pouring in like a great flood, making her blink her dark brown eyes bewilderedly as she gazed round on the unfamiliar scene. Then Miss Grimshaw, Michael's governess, came in to dress her and administer a preliminary glass of hot milk. And as Fran took the glass into her hands Miss Grimshaw exclaimed, in a voice like the bark of a very small dog: "What do you say?"

Fran, tired and astonished in the presence of so much concentrated strangeness, stared dumbly. "Come, come," reiterated Miss Grimshaw, barking more shrilly,—"WHAT DO YOU SAY?" And Fran, after profound and exhaustive self-examination, replied, softly: "I say what I like."

Not till the dressing and admonitions were over was she permitted to stand by the sun-bathed window and look down. Then at last she saw the meadows as she would never afterwards forget them—rolling uphill and downhill into the farthest distance, spattered with daisies and buttercups, and mightily ablaze with the sunlight of a perfect June morning.

CHAPTER ONE

MICHAEL

I

Miss Grimshaw, or Grimmy as they called her, looked after Fran and Michael with prim and occasionally irascible vigilance. She taught them, amongst other things, Deportment, the "Parts of Speech," the list of the English Sovereigns (with dates), and how to "line in" drawings that had previously been smudgily traced. John, of course, had long before finished with *his* share of Grimmy; he was in the Fifth Remove at Wellborough, and only at home during vacations. And Mrs. Savage, his mother and Michael's, was in Fran's eyes a benign goddess who came occasionally into the schoolroom and smiled.

She far more often smiled than spoke, and she had a lovely smile. It was a loveliness that was half sad. Once when Fran, copying Michael, called her "mother," she said, with this lovely sad smile: "You mustn't call me that, Fran. You see, I'm not your mother."

Fran wanted to be helpful. "Then what *shall* I call you? Doesn't anybody call you anything?"

And the answer came, as sadly as the smile: "You can call me—Nan—if you like."

"Nan?—*Nan!*" The name was sampled, considered, and approved. "Oh, Nan's a lovely name. . . . Isn't it, Micky?" (The appeal to him was inevitable.)

All he deigned to reply was a stout asseveration: *"I'm* going to call you 'Nan,' too, if Fran does."

And so it happened that they called her Nan, both of them, and that they always spoke of her as Nan. When John came home he was inclined to be superior about it. " 'Nan'—and 'Fran'—" he echoed, with faint disparagement. "Seems to me rather a muddle. . . . Anyway, *I* shall go on calling her 'mother.' "

To which Michael rejoined: "Yes, you do, John. Then she'll always know which of us it is. Wouldn't it be nice if people didn't have any real names at all, and you just had to call them what you liked?"

"Sort of idea you *would* have," replied John.

2

John was quiet, good-looking in a rather homely way, and (so it seemed during those early years) of pleasantly average intelligence. He just failed to take his London Matriculation, but, on the other hand, he was very successful as a prefect (and afterwards, as head-prefect) at Wellborough. During vacations he used to spend a great deal of his time at the Bermondsey tannery whence the fortunes of the Savage family derived. To Fran and Michael he was rather like his mother —a vague abstraction, drifting in on their lives from time to time and making no real difference. He gave them occasional orders which they had to obey, but that was all.

Michael was almost his complete opposite. Michael was not so much good-looking as wonderful-looking; he had dark brown eyes of such intense brightness that they seemed to be

actually consuming him from within; his eyes and his straggling, always intractable hair made him look almost ethereal. Yet, save for certain moods of unearthly shyness, he had quite a boyish supply of noise and laughter. Enthusiasms for one thing or another broke over him in constantly recurring waves; he was perpetually on fire with what John called "the sort of ideas he *would* have."

Physically, he was inclined to be weak; at the age of twelve he was given a thorough examination by Myles, the family doctor, and pronounced unfit for the rigours of Wellborough life. "Keep him at home," was Myles' advice to Mrs. Savage. "Let him idle as much as he wants—the more the better. His brain's precociously developed. . . . Perhaps, later on, he'll be ready for the university. . . . He'll burn up to nothing, if he's not careful. I've seen these infant prodigies before—they're marvellous in their teens, but when they reach their twenties they just go—*phit*—like a worn-out balloon. . . ."

Of John, Myles said, painting very vaguely a contrast: "He may seem slow, perhaps, but don't worry. He's got a good brain, and it's expanding. Don't think any less of him because he hasn't got Michael's fireworks."

So while John pursued his solidly respectable career at Wellborough, Michael stayed at Sky Peals, doing almost exactly what he liked. And what he liked happened always to be what Fran liked as well.

3

The two were inseparables. They went about together everywhere, did everything together; John and Nan were curious outsiders in their world. Especially Nan. "She seems almost frightened of us," Fran said once, and Michael replied: "She seems frightened of everything and everybody. She's frightened

of John—and even of Manning and the servants. In fact, I believe she's frightened to be alive."

John left Wellborough at the age of eighteen and, disdaining the university, came home to work at the Bermondsey tannery. He worked very hard and steadily, and all the time Michael was "idling." But the "idling" was feverishly active; it consisted in a never-ceasing procession of occupations. At any time the outside observer might have decided that it was Michael who was working hard, and John who was pursuing an easy humdrum existence.

There was hardly anything that Michael did not do, or try to do, to some extent, or at some time or another. (The qualifications are all very necessary.) He wrote verses (which were occasionally accepted, and still more occasionally paid for, by magazines and periodicals); he wrote short stories (which were always too weird and breathless to have any commercial value); he began (but never had the patience to finish) innumerable novels and plays. He painted a little, played the piano with brilliant inaccuracy, tried to play the violin and the 'cello; was a good singer and a tolerably good amateur actor; dabbled in heraldry and astrology and physical culture and spiritualism and telepathy and "eurhythmics"; and had extraordinary theories about almost every conceivable thing, from the correct way of making coffee to the authorship of *Wuthering Heights*. And also, constantly, and violently, he fell in love.

4

He went up to Oxford when he was eighteen. Fran was lonely at Sky Peals without him; she did not know what to do with her time. John wanted her to come to the tannery and take up a business career, but the prospect did not attract

her; she preferred, in the end, to attach herself to a women's college in London and take courses in history and economics. About this time also there came news that her grandfather, Alvarez Cordeiro, had died in Peru, and had left her all he had—amounting in value to between ten and fifteen thousand pounds.

She saw Michael only during vacations and at the occasional week-ends when she visited him in Oxford during term-time. She found him there the centre of a literary and artistic coterie whose chief occupation seemed to be mutual admiration and the talking of vast quantities of semi-brilliant nonsense. Michael held his own with ease in such society, for semi-brilliant nonsense came to his lips (and always had come) from an apparently quenchless spring within. She never liked him very much during those week-ends at Oxford. She always felt: These other people make him silly. . . . She was certain, at all events, that they were making him waste his time and neglect even the most obligatory of studies.

And yet she knew, secretly, that she *did* like him. She never had doubts, but she often had difficulties. Always, for instance, when she met him first after an absence (whether at Oxford or at Sky Peals) her immediate thought was: "What *did* I see in you, Micky, that used to make me like you so much?" And then, an hour or a day or a week afterwards, when they were alone together at some odd moment, she would suddenly feel, with a curious inside comfort, "Ah, *that,* Micky, *that's* what I like you for." And *that,* the essence of him, was elusive and unanalyzable. All she could discern was that it was something rather childlike.

Everybody at Oxford seemed to think that a brilliant "First" would fall to him as a matter of course. It came, therefore, as a shock when he failed altogether in his final examinations.

5

He did not tell her till they were half-way home on that bright June morning. She had been staying with friends in London for several weeks, and on her return he met her at the station in the two-seater car. There was a drive now, leading right up to the house, but he preferred to leave the car at the lodge and walk over the meadows.

For the meadows were lovely in June. They heaped up like billows, and there was one place where nothing could be seen except the green waves of this inland sea, crested with buttercups and swelling against the horizon in wide-sweeping arcs. This was the spot where they had so often played together as children, where they had hidden amongst the long grasses, and where, when Miss Grimshaw had at last found them, she had always exclaimed: "Well, I *declare!*"

And here Fran looked at Michael. She saw him first of all as a stranger, and then, gradually, as a strange man hiding a boy. Somehow, although she had seen him intermittently during his college years, she had never realized till now that he had been growing older. The years had been like elastic, pulled more and more tightly, yet all the time linking them to boyhood and girlhood; but now, all at once, the elastic had snapped and they were man and woman.

She knew, long before he told her, that he had failed in his examinations. But she let him announce and explain. "It was awfully bad luck," he said, without seeming especially perturbed. "You know, Fran, I'm not the examination sort . . . never could be. Things like that aren't in my line. Pity, though, because it's just happened at the wrong moment."

She made no comment, knowing that he would explain further.

He went on, dreamily: "Fran, there's going to be a first-class row at home."

"Because you've failed?"

"Partly that. . . . And also about other things."

"What other things?"

He said, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders: "Money."

"Money?" She was surprised. "But, Micky, that's the last thing there ought to be a row about. We've got all the money we want. I'm sure Nan's been very generous to me—always—and to you as well. And John——"

"Ah, John——" he echoed. Then came explanation in a fierce torrent. Apparently he had overspent during the past term at Oxford. Not that he had been at all extravagant—his biggest bills had been for books. John, however, had refused to allow him more than four hundred a year. Four hundred a year wasn't really enough to keep mind and soul together (he loved his little epigram). Nan had let him spend what he liked up to then, and it hadn't been much more than five hundred. But John had lately taken command of finances, had gone mad about economies, had already sacked half the servants and sold the stables. "We've both of us been away, Fran, and we haven't noticed what's been happening. John's lord of creation now. He's been playing for it for years, all the time you've been at Kensington and I've been at Oxford. No wonder he chose the works instead of the 'Varsity. . . . Poor old Nan—it's no use going to her now—all she can say is: 'John thinks this.' 'John would rather that.' 'I must ask John.' Oh, it's all sickening, damnable. . . . I believe I hate him so much—so much that I almost—*respect* him."

The house lay ahead of them, nestling in the dark green fold of a hill; it seemed never so beautiful as at morning,

when the sunlight kindled its old red brick to the colour of flame. As they approached, Fran remarked upon the scaffolding against the first-floor windows.

"That's what he's been doing with the money he's saved," said Michael, bitterly. "Pulling down the old wooden verandah—going to have an iron one instead—like a fire-escape. . . . That's just like him, isn't it?"

She had been perhaps dimly aware of the gradual transference of control from Nan to John. She had thought it natural enough, since John was growing older; it had certainly aroused no antagonism in her, hardly concern even. It had not seemed to affect her personally at all, for she spent most of her time in Kensington. It was Michael's burning and impetuous protest that brought to her the first touch of apprehension.

She spent most of the day working in her own upstairs study, while Michael dashed off in the car to Patchley on some business or other. She might have accompanied him, but she did not trouble. As always, on meeting him after a longish absence, she wondered whether she really liked him a great deal or not.

Towards six in the evening she heard the sound of a car coming up the new drive; she went out on to the landing to look, but the workmen were at the main window, and the only other was the mullion window at the end, with its stained glass through which the evening sun was pouring rivers of molten red and blue. She looked through the red and saw a red John stepping from a red car with a red dust-coat on his arm. Then she stood on tiptoe and saw a blue John saying something to a blue chauffeur and walking across a blue courtyard.

John, untransfigured by stained glass, was less exciting. She met him later at the dinner-table, and as usual he was quietly polite. There was nothing noisy or blatant about him. He

was not the Napoleonic type; his face, shrewd and perhaps forceful, was almost humdrum in certain lights. She studied his appearance with a new and closer interest; it was hard indeed to cast him for the rôle of tyrant.

He talked quietly about his day's work at the tannery, and Nan approved and echoed everything he said. Michael's failure, though obviously known, was not of course mentioned at all. After the coffee Michael went off on some errand of his own, and the others lingered talking for a while, but without saying anything of the least importance. Then John suggested that he should take Fran to inspect the new garages, and she agreed, because she could not very well refuse.

They went through the conservatories, and all the time she was half-wishing it had been Michael and not John who had commandeered her. John, however, was quite interesting in his own way; he was talking of the numerous improvements he was having made—a window here, an extra room there, and so on. "Quite recently," he remarked, "when I came to look into the affairs of the house, I found them seriously rotten—structurally as well as financially. The bedroom verandahs, for instance, were all but falling down—eaten away by ants. The ants won't eat the metal ones I'm having put up. . . . And as for the financial side of things, I decided there was nothing for it but a good straightforward row, once and for all." He added, with a slight smile: "So I had the row—it was while you were away, about a fortnight ago—and as a result five of the staff have left. I discovered, for example, that the village grocer had been giving the servants tips—practically bribes—for them to be wasteful with things like soap and polishes. . . . Of course that had to stop. We don't buy in the village now."

He went on, after a pause: "I've been wanting to have a talk about this with you for some time, but you've been away

so much. . . . And there's the tannery as well. When I first began working there I made it my business to find out all I could about every section of the work. The result is that now, when I'm coming more or less into control, I know just what wants doing . . . and what I'm going to do. To be quite frank, there needs to be a reorganization from top to bottom —and a weeding-out of abuses. There's been slackness of all kinds, and even corruption. . . . Machinery, too, wants overhauling and modernizing. All that's bound to cost money. But it's got to be done, just as those verandahs had got to be renewed."

"Well?" She wondered where all this was leading.

He said: "We've got to do the things that need to be done, and therefore we've got to economize in the things that needn't be done. You see?"

She smiled faintly. She certainly saw, and to show him the completeness of her vision, she replied calmly: "Micky has just been telling me about one of your economies—a cut in his college allowance."

He seemed by no means displeased that she had broached the matter so directly. "Michael is extravagant," he said. "I made careful inquiries, and I came to the conclusion that four hundred is ample. . . . If he finds it impossible, he must come away and earn his own living."

"But it's chiefly books that account for his overspending, isn't it? And books are hardly extravagance, are they?"

"*Books?*" He uttered the word with care. "Yes, it's chiefly books, I'll admit. Perhaps you'd like to see the books. They're all in my room."

"Your room?" she echoed, and he rejoined:

"Yes, my room. Let's go and see them."

He led the way rapidly back through the conservatories and into the house, then across the library into a room at the

farther end which overlooked the prettiest corner of the gardens. She followed him rather bewilderedly. "You'll be interested in his selections," he remarked, as he closed the door behind him. "There they are," he added, pointing to a glass-fronted case. "I put them in there because they're obviously too good for my common old shelves."

They were certainly the acquirements of a person of taste. A fine leather-bound edition of Walter Pater and the entire set of the Wessex Hardy were conspicuous features, but the single volumes were no less elegant. Adlington's *Apuleius,* a sumptuously-bound Cervantes, Florio's *Montaigne,* the plays of Cyril Tourneur—truly the choice of a collector whose tastes were both rich and catholic.

"This," said John, picking up a slim quarto volume bound in delicate Italian leather, "is William Byrd's *Breviary of Health,* printed in 1552. On the bill it is marked at five pounds."

"But—but how did you get hold of all these?" Fran asked.

"I just wrote to Michael's scout to send them here," replied John, replacing William Byrd on the shelf. "When Michael couldn't pay his bills out of his allowance I naturally asked to see them, and when I saw one for fifty pounds' worth of books I thought it would be interesting to see what the books were. Incidentally, I had them valued by a London expert, and I find they're worth twenty pounds at most. Your Oxford bookseller is evidently a shrewd judge of character. At present I'm negotiating with him to take back the lot for the purchase price less ten per cent."

"Does Micky know all this?"

"Certainly not. He didn't tell me when he bought them. Why should I tell him when I sell them?"

"But—they're his books."

"If he can pay for them himself—certainly. Not otherwise."

6

She went early to her room that night, pleading tiredness. But it was not to sleep. The night was warm, and she took a wicker-chair close to the open window and read some of her notes on economic history—the subject in which she had specialized at college. But they did not hold her attention at all keenly, perhaps because of the many interruptions—the large moths that dashed themselves against the orange lamp-shade, the waves of perfume drifting up from the gardens below, and over everything the high, distant moon, a constant lure for her eyes.

It was almost midnight when she heard footsteps in the corridor outside, and then a sharp, eager knock at her door. She opened it, and Michael faced her. His cheeks were pale from some strong inward excitement; he stammered slightly as he spoke.

"Fran. . . . I thought I could see you reading by the window. Fran. . . . John's got my b-books—all the b-books I b-bought in Oxford this last term. They're in his study downstairs. How on earth . . . ? It's queer. . . . I d-don't understand. . . ."

"Come inside, Micky, if you want to talk. And—and—if you like—I'll explain all about your books."

She put the matter, as she thought, quite impartially. She told him exactly what had happened, and then made a few brief comments. "Of course, Micky, it was rather extravagant of you to buy all those expensive books. Mind, now, I'm not defending John. I certainly don't think he ought to have written for them without telling you. You're both of you wrong—to a certain extent."

She had guessed that he would be angry, but she had hardly anticipated the extraordinary vehemence of his wrath. He

almost trembled with rage as he listened to her quiet narrative. "Fran, I'll not p-put up with it!" he stammered. "He treats me like a l-little schoolboy. . . . Fran—he's only a few years older than me—why—why should I obey him? Writing to Oxford behind my back—the d—damned little c-cad!"

A curious feeling of pity for him overwhelmed her; it wrapped her round like a warm and living glow, kindling her cheeks and making her temples throb with her quickened heartbeat. She touched his sleeve and said: "It's no use arguing, Micky—you're wrong as well as John. All the same—I think—I think—perhaps—I'm rather more on your side than on his—at least—I mean——"

But she did not know what she meant. It seemed at that moment as though the moon blazed out more dazzlingly over the meadows; Michael must have noticed it, for he exclaimed suddenly: "Fran, come for a walk—somewhere—anywhere. I can't sleep tonight, and it's beautiful in the moonlight."

She laughed softly. "What an absurd idea, Micky! Somebody would hear us and then there'd be a terrific burglar-scare. . . . Go to bed—you'll soon be asleep."

The moment came, as it was bound to come, when she knew that she did like him, when she felt that she knew him perfectly, every inch of him—his brown, eager eyes and gold-brown hair that would never comb out tidily, the mole on the back of his left hand which in the old days they had called "Christopher," and, above all, his smile, sudden and almost bewildered, like a light that dazzled even himself.

He gave her that smile now. "I shan't sleep," he said, shaking his head. "I shall just lie awake all the night through—and plan out the battle."

7

The battle took place the following day, but it did not proceed according to plan—certainly not according to Michael's

plan. The day was Sunday, and so John was able to ask Michael into his study after breakfast and talk to him at leisure. The books, of course, had disappeared from the glass case.

John was very calm and polite. He had a magnificent air of reasonableness. His attitude seemed always to say: "Come, now, be a good fellow and listen to *my* point of view. . . ." He began by assuring Michael that he had no desire to cause trouble, but that fifty pounds surplus expenditure over the allowance for a single term was rather a serious matter. He had, he explained, been trying to introduce some sort of costing system into the household finances; he allowed each person so much a month, after inquiry into needs, and if this sum were exceeded in any individual instance, the whole of the arrangements became disorganized. An equally serious matter was the sort of spending that had led to Michael's excess. All the books, he thought, were rather unnecessary, "luxuries, at a time when it would be better if we could manage to do without luxuries." And also, "I happen to know that some of the books are very richly bound——"

Here Michael sprang a mine. "Of course you happen to know. You wrote to my scout to send them to you. A dirty, rotten trick, and you needn't think you'll be able to explain it away!"

John was surprised, but not perturbed. He never *was* perturbed. "As I was saying, Michael, the books are very richly bound. They are also—and this is rather important from your point of view—worth nothing like the sums you paid for them. I had them independently valued in London. I should advise you to change your bookseller."

"I'm damned if I do!" was Michael's hot retort. "I'm not everlastingly thinking of pounds and profits and percentages!

I've got used to dealing with old Driver, even if he does charge a few shillings more than somebody else, and I shall go on dealing with him!"

This, to John, was worse than revolt; it was heresy. "Your attitude, Michael, seems to me so unbusinesslike that I shan't attempt to argue about it. All I will say is this: that if you want to remain at Oxford for another year and have another try for your degree you must give me your word that in future you will keep within your allowance. If you really insist on mingling business with sentiment, do so by all means, but at your own expense."

"And you'll pay Driver's bill for last term, I suppose?"

"Most decidedly not. I am arranging with him now to take back the books at the purchase price less ten per cent."

That was the final spark to the tinder. "The devil you are!" Michael cried, banging the table and striding to the door. "I've had enough of this. Go to hell and take your blasted ten per cent with you! That's my answer, and the only one you'll get!"

He rushed upstairs to Fran's room and found her busy with her notes; by the time he reached her he was nearly in tears.

8

There was no doubt about it; Michael was at fault. He had, so she could judge from the story he poured out to her in a stream of eager words, woefully lost his temper, and thereby the breach, which John had tried to bridge, had been made wider. "He's so damned calm about it—that's what I can't stand," Michael exclaimed. "To listen to him talking, you'd think he was the most reasonable man on earth."

"Perhaps he is," said Fran quietly, yet it was only one part of her speaking; the other was full to bursting with a stormy sympathy for Michael. It was not in the least calm or rea-

soned, but something keenly personal that welled up spontaneously and would have broken its barriers if she had tried to impede it. It was not in the least like (for example) the sympathy she felt for the child-workers of the early factory system, or the revolting labourers of 1830.

The worst of it was, as Michael said, that John was so calm about it. There was none of that heroic bluster that would have put Michael instantly at his ease. At meals, which they were forced to take together, John's attitude to Michael was no more than a shade cool; there was no open estrangement. It was obvious, too, that John had told Nan nothing at all, either of the quarrel or its origins.

Fran hardly saw John except at dinner; he caught the 7.05 from Patchley every morning in order to be at the works by the time the men arrived. But there was something ominous in the atmosphere, something that presaged a convulsion.

9

A few evenings later, as she was going up to her room, John stopped her. He said: "By the way, Fran, if you see Michael you might tell him that I've written to Oxford withdrawing him."

She stared at him in stupefied astonishment.

"You have? You've done that? *Already?*"

He replied: "Yes. I told him I should, if he didn't promise to keep within his allowance in future. He hasn't given me his promise, so I've had to keep mine. I usually do."

After a pause he added: "So now he must decide what he's going to do for a living. I've a post vacant in my office which he can have if he applies for it within three days. After that I shall advertise."

She told Michael later on that same evening. They were walking over the meadows amidst bright moonlight, and all

around them the wind blew the grasses into rippling waves of silver. Rather to her surprise he was not angry. He merely said, when she had told him: "Oh, well, it can't be helped. He can always beat me *that* way, because he has the power. And, of course, to work in his stuffy little office with his eye on me all the time—oh, it's too absurd—I'd rather starve. . . ."

"Yet you don't seem angry about it?"

He suddenly flung himself down amongst the grasses. "I suppose I'm not, really," he answered, in a puzzled voice. He cried suddenly: "Fran, lie down here and look up at the moon. . . . No, no, I'm not angry. It's so certain that he can beat me in his own way that I've lost all interest in the fight. And it's just as certain that he can't beat me in *my* way. . . . Besides, this moonlight's like a drug—it soaks into you—makes you live in a sort of dream. . . . Fran, I'm beginning to be perfectly happy. It seems queer, doesn't it, when there's all this trouble in the air? But it's true, and I don't understand it a little bit. Why *should* I be happy? What have I got to be happy about? And yet I *am* happy—happy—oh, God, I'm happy. . . ."

He leaned forward and took hold of both her hands, pulling her down on to the slope beside him. "I think I might write verse for a living, or go on a farm, or be a travelling actor, or play the piano at a cinema, or run away to sea—anything rather than be John's office-boy."

The warmth of his body was kindling her, and beyond and deeper than the stillness of the night she thought she could hear a curious undercurrent of sound, as if the earth were murmuring under the white blaze of the moon. The sound rose till it throbbed in her temples like a dynamo; she put her hand on Michael's arm as if seeking as well as giving sympathy. "I think you are going to have a very hard time, Micky," she said.

His answer came like a voice from a different world. "I don't care—I don't care. Nothing could make me care, or make me less happy than I am. . . ."

10

Despite her sympathy for Michael, Fran found it difficult to dislike John. He seemed extraordinarily anxious to make her life at home easy and comfortable; he even (and it was like him that his idea of help should be so practical) offered to have her study refurnished and redecorated if she were intending to use it a great deal.

"I'm relieved to know that you're not going to turn *me* out to earn my own living," she said, pointedly.

"You *can* earn your own living if you like," he answered, smiling. "Just go round the kitchens now and again and take an interest in the more ordinary details of the household. I've been meaning to ask you for a long while. . . . Mother, you see, doesn't do that sort of thing very well, and I haven't the time."

She agreed to do as he suggested. He went on to talk about efficiency and economy, but she interrupted him. "I'll help you willingly," she said, "so far as the house is concerned. But don't think I agree with your 'efficient' method of dealing with Michael, because I don't."

"All right." He nodded quite imperturbably. "That's frank, anyway. And I'll be equally frank when *you* do something that *I* don't agree with."

Meanwhile, on a far stranger and more ethereal plane her friendship with Michael prospered. As always, she did not know why she liked him so much. Even his faults attracted her—his rash, impulsive ways, his tendency to judge hastily and wrongly, his unfair and contemptuous hostility towards

John. "Old Percentage," he called him. "He hasn't a thought above material success. That's why he can do nothing with me—because our standards are different. Really, in his heart, he must be frightened of me."

Often during July and August they motored about the countryside in the old two-seater Delage. Michael drove, and his driving was like most other things that he did. He used to crawl very slowly along the country lanes and put on speed alarmingly at the outskirts of towns; he had also the habit of deciding to turn down attractive-looking side-roads just too late to negotiate the curve easily.

One afternoon they went picnicking to Myvern with the car. The day was burningly hot, and for that reason the drive along the cool, tree-shaded lanes was especially entrancing. They explored the old and ruined abbey, had tea by the roadside, and set out for the return journey about five o'clock. Michael's spirits were immensely high. As always when he was happy, he talked grandly, flamboyantly, even ridiculously; he composed extempore verse as he went along; he shouted wildly to passers-by, and generally behaved as though he were slightly drunk. He had been talking about John, and the entire lack of poetry in John's make-up. That had led him to say: "He wouldn't understand poetry unless he saw it quoted on the Stock Exchange." And that, in turn, had led to one of those swift and explosive ideas that seized him almost bodily. He kept shouting, as he drove on: "Fran, that's an idea. . . . How to make John interested in the Muses. Float them. . . . Quote them. . . . Article on Chaucer in the *Financial Times*. . . . Sharp Rise in Elizabethans. . . . Tennyson's Dull. . . . Pope and Dryden's Firm after the Carry-Over. . . ."

"Look where you're driving, Micky," she said, warningly.

"Heavy Bear Account in Brownings," he yelled, and at the same time gesticulated with both hands. The moment was

unwise and ill-chosen, for the car suddenly swerved out of control and plunged over the edge of the road into a ditch several feet below.

Fran was pitched out first; she fell into a pool of sandy mud. Michael followed her, but into a much less hospitable bed of nettles. Almost simultaneously the front tyres blew up and the wings and bonnet crumpled like a child's tin toy. Fortunately the speed had not been excessive, and neither Fran nor Michael was badly hurt. The first thing they did when they picked themselves out of the wreckage was to laugh. For the moment the whole affair seemed grotesquely funny, a sort of Rabelaisian practical joke; Michael took hold of Fran's hands and roared with merriment.

Then, almost immediately afterwards, the reaction came, and he sank down on a tuft of grass by the roadside and burst into tears. He wasn't hurt, beyond sprains and nettle-stings, but his nerves were on fire after the shock.

Fran came to him and gave him comfort as a mother might have comforted a small child. She was so much stronger than he, and yet, as she came physically near to him, she was conscious of a power he possessed over her—the strange compensating power of the weak to charm and allure. "Micky . . ." she whispered, "Micky. . . ."

"I'm not hurt," he gasped. "Not much, at any rate. . . . I'm just thinking of what John will say."

She became stormily protective. "Don't worry about John. *I'll* deal with him."

11

He seemed to accept her offer as a complete shouldering of his burden. He rose, and though he winced whenever he moved his right arm, his manner soon became cheerful again.

"Bet you what'll worry John most is the damage to the car," he said, with a grin.

By what seemed an especial miracle on their behalf, a thermos-flask of hot tea, left over from the picnic, was still in the car, intact and undamaged. They sat down by the road-side, drinking gratefully, smoking cigarettes, and studying the road-map.

An hour later they walked home through fields of ripening corn, with no worse prospect than that of missing dinner. They had arranged with a farmer to shelter the remains of the car, and the beauty of the evening rose over them like a slow tide quenching all troublous memories. In the east, as they walked, the moon appeared—a milky disc in a blue that was already darkening into a rich velvet purple.

The accident, though they had thrown it off their minds, had stirred them nevertheless to a deep sincerity. They talked of their ambitions, and Michael outlined again, more simply and less truculently than before, his attitude towards John. "It isn't the thing itself, Fran, so much as the principle of the thing. If I give way over this, I shall have John bossing me all my life. . . ."

She smiled, and he suddenly caught hold of her arm with his uninjured wrist. "You know, Fran, you *do* help me. Awfully. . . . I don't know why or how. . . . Yet I'm not sure of you—you try to hold yourself aloof—you're rather scared to be altogether on my side, aren't you? Somehow, in my mind, I can see you and John talking about me very calmly and sensibly, and deciding that I'm an awful failure . . . and you deciding that you won't have anything to do with me."

"You needn't worry about *that,* Micky. *That* won't ever happen."

"No? Do you—do you—really—mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it."

"You won't ever let John persuade you to take his side against me?"

She answered quietly: "I don't feel I shall ever let John persuade me to do anything."

"Or me either," he added. "You don't want to let *anybody* persuade you, do you? You just want to remain yourself—calm and aloof—always—eh?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't know. . . ."

It was full moonlight when they reached the meadows. He said then: "Old Grimmy used to tell me how your grandfather brought you to our house years ago. You came across those meadows then, but it was night-time and you were fast asleep."

"Only half-asleep, Micky. I remember blinking my eyes open every now and then and wondering where I was."

"Do you remember the time before that—when you were in South America?"

"Not very much. I've a sort of confused memory of the storm at sea in which my father was drowned, and of my mother holding me very tightly. . . . It must have been terrible, that night."

"You remember your father and mother, of course?"

"My mother, yes—very well—and also my old grandfather. But not my father—except that he was very big and had a deep, strong voice. He had to look after the ranches, I suppose—anyhow, he was never much at home."

He said, whimsically: "Whenever I read anything about South America I always think of you—I picture you wandering through the Amazonian forests, or scampering about in the shadow of Chimborazo—something wild and romantic."

"There was nothing romantic in my early childhood," she answered laughing. "Or, if there was, I don't remember it." She glanced round her and then added, in a whisper: "Nothing, at any rate, half so romantic as this."

The tranquil night was all over them, drenching them in radiance; even will-power seemed to dissolve into the opaque tide, leaving mind and body to surrender like bending reeds to the stream.

"The meadows of the moon!" Michael whispered, and at that moment the surrender was made—delicately, and yet in a way that could never be revoked.

"Don't go in yet," he cried. "We so often miss dinner that they won't worry about us."

She neither agreed nor disagreed, but when he sank down on the grassy slope she flung herself next to him and clasped her hands in front of her knees. She heard him cry out sharply; then she looked round and saw him nursing his injured wrist.

"Damn the thing," he exclaimed. "I forgot all about it, and I put my hand down—like this—" He gestured. "It hurts like fire, but I don't care—oh, why *should* I care?"

"Micky, it may be a bad sprain. Hadn't we better go up to the house and have it attended to?"

"No . . . Don't bother about it. Forget it. . . ." He leaned sideways to her and put his arm under hers so that his hand covered her breast. "Your heart's troubling you more than my wrist."

"What do you mean?"

"I can feel how fast it's beating."

"No faster than usual. Or if it is——"

"Yes?"

She hesitated a moment and then replied, with curt nonchalance: "I can't help it, whether it is or not."

"Of course you can't. And you don't care, either, do you?"

"Care about what?"

"About what you—or I—do."

"I always care about what *I* do. But it wouldn't be much good caring about what you did, would it?"

"Not even if——"

She said, before he had time even to finish his sentence: "I should let you." She flung the words at him challengingly, as much in defiance as in invitation. Then she wondered what he had been going to say, and why she should have made so terrific a mistake.

For a moment he was perfectly still and silent, his sentence unfinished and forgotten, and only hers remembered. Then, at last, with an almost unearthly delicacy, he bent his head to hers and kissed her shyly on the lips. The touch of them seemed to send him spinning back from manhood to boyhood again; it was the boy, the pure boy, who spoke to her a few seconds later, who laughed roguishly in her face and said: "I say, what queer games we're up to. . . . Anybody might think. . . ."

That sentence, as well, he left unfinished. But a few minutes later he added, as calmly and abstractly as if he were examining himself through a window: "I can see now what's happened. I've fallen in love with you. . . . You're about the nineteenth. But I'm so glad it's you—this time—and not anybody else. . . . Isn't it going to be interesting?"

12

The next morning she rose rather early and found to her surprise that John had not travelled to town by his usual 7.05. While she was having breakfast, indeed, he came in and greeted her cordially. "Sorry I wasn't in till late last night," he said, "but mother told me all about the accident. Glad you and Michael weren't hurt."

He added, pouring himself out a cup of coffee: "I thought I'd just run down to Pilcher's Farm and look at the car. . . . Martin thinks the repairs will cost about fifty pounds."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Wings and tyres and radiator and engine all badly smashed, you know." He seemed judicial, but not in the least reproachful. "Of course, an accident like that couldn't have happened except through negligence. I'm afraid, when the car's been repaired, Michael mustn't be allowed to drive again. *You* can learn, if you like. . . . The truth is, Michael *can't* drive."

It *was* the truth, and she knew it. Yet somehow her blood ran cold to hear him summing up Michael's deficiencies so ruthlessly, and, above all, so accurately.

"Michael expected that you would be rather concerned about the car," she said, with a hint of irony.

He did not notice it, or, if he did, he pretended otherwise. "Naturally I am concerned," he replied. "I have to foot the bill. Fifty pounds for unnecessary books and another fifty for an unnecessary smash-up are rather unfortunate items in one's balance-sheet."

Then, with perfect good humour, he changed the subject and chatted with her desultorily while she breakfasted.

13

Curious, that morning, that she did not settle so easily to work. Yet perhaps not entirely curious, for innumerable aches and sprains revealed to her that the fall from the car had not left her entirely unscathed. But there was another ache, and one that defied analysis. It was an ache that kept interposing itself between her eyes and the calm facts of economic history; a sort of lens through which she saw things personally rather than economically. If, for example, she studied the conditions of factory labour in the early nineteenth century she caught herself picturing some particular family of child-

slaves, their dull miseries and morbid joys; the whole subject stood out in her mind with extraordinary vividness, yet rather as material for a novel than for a text-book.

The subtly altered aspect annoyed her. Her ambition, formed during her first year at college, was to pursue some work to research and write a book about it. Neither John nor Michael understood how quietly passionate she was about this work. John's attitude was sympathetic and respectful, but he looked instinctively for some practical result that did not exist; while Michael was innately unsympathetic towards the impartiality of outlook necessary for such work. "That's your aloofness, Fran," he used to tell her. "The part of you that walks by itself."

The part of her that walked by itself would not walk at all on the morning after the motor accident. It collapsed into an undignified heap as it were, and lay comatose. And when, in the midst of her desperate efforts to revive it, Michael knocked at the door and burst in upon her, she was quite in the mood to snub him.

"Hullo, Fran . . . I wondered where I should find you. Feeling all right after yesterday?"

"Rather a mass of aches."

"Aches? Oh yes . . . but isn't it lovely to ache? I hate feeling too comfortable. . . . Fran, come for a walk."

"Sorry, Micky, I've got work to do."

"Put it off."

"I'm not going to."

"Well, let's go out to-night after dinner. It'll be moonlight again. Over the meadows——"

"Can't spare the time, Micky. I really must get some of this work done. I gave you a whole day yesterday, remember."

"Oh, damn the work. . . . We'll go to-night, anyhow. You wait. You'll have had enough of your work by then."

"I warn you I shan't," she answered, laughing.

14

That afternoon it began to rain, and towards evening a heavy gale-swept downpour set in. She was half-glad, half-sorry, but she could not forbear a smile at Michael as they sat down to dinner to the sound of the swishing of the rain on the creeper outside the window. "The rain will do good," she said, watching his face.

During the meal John asked her if she would come some day to view the tannery, and she gladly agreed. Meanwhile, Michael glared alternately at her and at the rain-washed window-panes; she glanced sideways at him, thinking how the air of half-sulky boyishness fitted him perfectly, and how infinitely younger he was than herself. Was he really falling in love with her, or was the remark he had made to her the evening before the sort of ecstatic thing he might have said to anybody? You could never be sure with Michael; his falling in love would certainly be unlike other people's. She found a curious comfort in pondering over the problem, and the only conclusion she reached was that she must be very kind to him, and try to help him in his present difficulties.

After dinner John went out, and the others adjourned to the library. While Nan sat reading magazines at one end of the large room, Fran let Michael take her to the piano at the other. He had a rather fine voice, half-baritone, half-tenor; and his piano-playing was well above the average, despite many faults. In certain moods he played Chopin delightfully, and in all moods he played Bach and Beethoven very badly indeed. He had a marvellously sensitive ear, but his sight-reading was poor, and he rarely played without interposing cleverly-inserted versions of his own which he was too lazy to

rectify. He was easily best in self-accompanied songs, when both playing and voice, however eccentric, were at any rate in perfect accord.

That night he played several Chopin studies while Fran watched beside him; she loved Chopin, and the complete unmusicality of John and Nan made her fondness inevitably an additional link with Michael. She felt tranquil while she was listening to him; she did not want him to talk; above all, she did not want him to talk seriously. But during one of the noisier studies he said: "What a pity it's raining, Fran! . . . Tomorrow will do, though. Only it's awful to wait."

She shrugged her shoulders almost irritably. "To wait? To wait for what, Micky? And why is it so awful?"

All the time his fingers were racing over the keys with entrancing brilliance; they seemed to be accomplishing their task entirely on their own, while brain and will were occupied elsewhere. He really *was* a marvellous child. . . . Perhaps he read her thought, for he went on, in a hoarse rhythmic whisper: "You're nearly as bad as John. You're treating me like a schoolboy. You don't seem to realize—even after last night—that I'm grown-up. . . ."

Anything, she felt, to prevent him from discussing the night before. "Oh, by the way, how's your wrist, Micky? It doesn't seem to be interfering with your playing."

"Oh, damn my wrist. It's hurting like hell, if you want to know."

"Then you oughtn't to play. You'll make it worse."

"But I *want* to play." He almost shouted. "And when I want things badly enough I don't mind being hurt. . . . *You* do, don't you? You believe in 'safety first.'"

He looked at her intensely, till she had to turn away from mere embarrassment; then he began to play and sing the *Chanson Indoue,* by Rimsky-Korsakov. The bewitching plain-

tive melody suited both his voice and his fingers to perfection, and she felt again—more strongly than she had ever felt it before—the sheer, unearthly fascination of him. With his fingers and his voice and his eyes and his whole body and soul, she felt him drawing her, luring her; she was curious as well as scared.

He said, as soon as he had finished: "I say, I'm damned glad I'm *not* going back to Oxford."

15

Not many days afterwards she went with John to the tannery; she had been before, but not since John had been in authority. He piloted her round the whole establishment and explained to her the various detailed processes in the manufacture of leather, gave her vast quantities of figures with enthusiastic glibness, and in describing the work and capacity of some of the newest tanning pits became almost lyrical. His whole heart and intellect, Fran could see, were bound up with this incredibly ugly building with its incredibly ugly sights, sounds, and smells.

She had lunch with him in his office—a plain two-course meal from the canteen—"exactly the same meal that the workmen can buy for eightpence," John proudly informed her. He told her then of the great and finally successful struggle he had had to rid the tannery of mismanagement and corruption. "It's going to do well some day," he said with smouldering enthusiasm. "We want smart work and smart men to do it. There's a wonderful chance here for any young fellow with brains and enthusiasm. I wish Michael had either."

She felt herself rallying instinctively to Michael's defence. "He has both," she said, "though they mayn't be your kind."

John smiled. "He'll have to make a decision pretty soon,

anyhow. I'm reckoning that he's on his holidays at present—not that he's earned any. I'm allowing him a month—till the beginning of September. After that I don't intend to support him."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. He persists in defying me. He can't expect me to keep him in luxurious idleness. After next month he won't live at Sky Peals unless he pays each month for his maintenance."

She said slowly: "And what does—Nan—say—to that?"

"Mother," he answered, emphasizing the word, "believes that I am treating Michael fairly and generously. To be forced to earn his own living (since he refuses to do so voluntarily) will be almost the best thing in the world for him. I've certainly no desire to turn him out of the house. I'd no desire to take him away from Oxford till his attitude compelled me to do so. Even now I'll find him a decent job in this office if he wants one . . . I assure you, Fran, I have absolutely no feeling of animosity at all, even if he has. And you, if you are wise, will try to influence him for his good."

She felt, as always when John spoke to her, a certain sickening sense of defeat. John sounded so *right,* so utterly fair and reasonable. And yet—and yet—she could not help thinking of Michael. She left the works as soon after lunch as she could, feeling strangely unsettled.

16

Of course she was fated to be between the two of them. Michael avoided John as much as possible, and John certainly would not go running after Michael; so she was the medium through which they had to deliver their respective ultimata. Although the quarrel and its possible consequences worried

her, she was serenely aware that the post of mediator suited her temperamentally. "You see, Micky," she said, "I always can see two sides of a question."

And his reply, blindingly swift, was: "Only *two,* Fran? What a frightfully narrow-minded person you must be!"

She told him that same evening what John had said. She had not intended to tell him so soon, but he hurried to her room after dinner and was obviously eager to learn what sort of a time she had had with John at the works.

He smiled when she had finished. "I still don't care, Fran. I don't care *what* John does. And if he thinks I'm going to worry about what I'm going to do next month, he's mistaken. I'll wait till the time comes and then decide."

"But, Micky, you know he means what he says."

"Oh, yes, I know that. Anybody can mean what he says. It's saying what one means that's the real difficulty. . . ." He paused for a moment, and then went on, less calmly: "He hasn't in his whole body as much music or art or love of beauty as you and I have in our little fingers. He wants his thousands a year—that's all. By God, I'm not so easily satisfied."

"But he wouldn't understand that, Micky."

"I know. He reckons things out in terms of money. Very well, then, in terms of money, I want about five hundred a year. I'd be perfectly content with that. It would keep me in books and music and odd little things I had a fancy for. In the old days rich men felt they had a duty towards art—just as to-day they feel that they have a duty towards hospitals. They used to choose out some poor poet or painter and give him—not what he earned or what he was worth—but just enough to keep him comfortable and happy. I think it must have been very often a decent and honourable arrangement. . . . But John, of course, wouldn't believe in it."

"I'm not sure that he wouldn't," she replied, reflectively.

"But you'd have to approach him the right way. If you told him definitely you wanted to write, or paint, or take up music —or do anything seriously——"

"And if I supplied him with a carefully drawn-up schedule of what I intended to do every day for the next five years, eh? Oh, it's impossible . . . and you know it is, Fran, as well as I do. You're on my side, not on John's. Aren't you?"

"I'm not on any side, Micky. I can see that you're both right and both wrong."

She was sitting at her writing-desk and he had drawn up a chair opposite hers, so that his head was against a background of books and bookshelves. The last livid rays of the sun were streaming in through the window, and they suddenly struck his hair and the bookcovers into a single turbulent, gorgeously-compounded splash of colour. There seemed something symbolical in the flame that was consuming Hammond's *Town Labourer* and Cunningham's *Growth of English Industry and Commerce.*

He said, sharply: "That impartiality's a pose, Fran. It pleases you for the present, but some day you'll be beyond being pleased by it. Oh, Fran, you *are* on my side—I can *feel* you are . . . and I want you to be—more—more than John wants anything—even money."

"Oh, leave John out of it. . . ."

"Yes, let's leave him out of it. Let's be our two selves. Give up the pose. A pose is lifeless—put the 'i' into it—the personal 'I,' and it becomes a poise. A poise is living, vital, a prelude to movement. Poise, Fran, as much as you like, but don't pose."

He had the strange habit, fascinating to her, of using all his body when he spoke; not only his lips, but his eyes, his hands, even his hair seemed to vibrate in total harmony. She said, quietly: "Micky, what *do* you mean? I believe you think

you're playing with words when all the time they're playing with you."

"No, no—I mean all I said. I want you to poise splendidly —along with me. You must. . . . There's something that links us—" He put his arms across the table and held her tightly. "Something that burns us together——"

His enthusiasm half-frightened her; she tried instinctively to say something that would damp it. "Perhaps it's just physical attraction," she remarked, quietly.

He looked at her till she wished she had not spoken. "With me, Fran, there isn't anything that's *merely* physical. There's always something more than that. Something—rather—quaint—if you know what I mean . . . like a taste you're interested in before you know whether you like it or not."

The words conveyed something to her, something that made her catch hold of his arm and exclaim: "Oh, Micky—*do* go away and let me work. I don't know what your game is, but you're making me infernally unsettled. . . ."

"Game!" He rose and stood close to her. "That's a fine word to use, Fran. . . . Is there anything on earth more glorious —more child-like—than a game?" He caught her into his arms, and she yielded fully, instantly, with every limb and muscle; she cared no more for anything else in the world. And when he whispered, "Come for a walk in the meadows," she nodded tranquilly, like a child that has perfect happiness.

17

She reckoned herself to be slightly in love with him. It was rather delightful, but it was also (in another sense) tiresome. She really had no desire to fall in love with anybody—least of all with Micky. She had her own work to do, her research book to write, and any emotional disturbance might

easily upset her for the job. She was glad she was not the innocent village maiden walking into experience with blind and trusting eyes, but an entirely sophisticated modern girl with an analytical mind that desired to see everything frankly, even her own self. And looking thus frankly at herself, she decided: I am—I *am*—yes—just a little bit—in love with Micky. . . .

Of course the whole thing was slight in texture. Vaguely in her mind love appeared as a huge something that would one day (no doubt at a more convenient stage in her research work) seize and envelope her, yet not with complete possession. (She would never allow that.) And it was rather comforting to reflect how absurdly opposite were Michael and any idea of "hugeness."

The charming thing about him was that she could talk to him so frankly. "You needn't think," she told him once in the meadows, "that because I let you kiss me I'm passionately in love with you. I'm fond of you, because we've always been such friends, and I like you to kiss me because—I suppose—you're male and I'm female, but beyond that——"

"Yes, beyond that—" he echoed, picking up her words instantly—"beyond that—there's something else. Haven't you felt it?"

He added, when she was silent: "I will *make* you feel it."

18

As August blazed through its teens into its twenties she saw a good deal of Michael, but not very much of John. The trouble between them, though still unsettled, seemed quiescent; she almost hoped that, without anybody saying or doing anything else, the matter might somehow be allowed to slide. But one evening after dinner John managed to accost

her in the library. He began, with the utmost geniality: "Oh, by the way, Fran, do you remember some time ago I promised to tell you if you did anything I didn't agree with?"

"Yes, I seem to remember."

"Well then, I'd better keep my promise. I don't agree with the way you're behaving with Michael."

He went on, with hardly a pause: "You aren't helping him —by treating him as you have been. He ought to be making up his mind what he's going to do after the end of the month. It might be a good thing if you were to remind him."

For the moment then she felt that she was wholly on Michael's side, without even abstract qualifications. Her cheeks kindled as she answered: "Micky doesn't need reminding. I daresay he has his own plans, just as you have yours. And as for my friendship with him, it's my own affair."

"Of course it is." He smiled suavely. "That's precisely why I want to talk to you about it. Don't you see that with your considerable influence over him you have the power to help or hinder him a great deal?" He touched her gently on the arm. "Look here, I hate family quarrels. I only want to be reasonable. I'm in charge of this household—at mother's desire—and I really can't let Michael go on flatly defying me out of mere spite. That's what it seems to be. . . . Don't think I want to bully anybody. I don't bully you, do I? But then you don't go about deliberately making as much trouble as you can, do you? . . . Tell me now, if you care to—has Michael any plans for the future?"

"He hasn't—so far as I know."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to compel him to do work he doesn't like. I know he's different from me—artistic and all that—and if he wants to take up a career of that kind I certainly wouldn't object. . . . Only, he can't just stay on here in a state of sulky rebellion. You see that, don't

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you? He must in his own way, pull his weight *with* us all, not *against* us. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think I do."

"Try," he said finally, with a friendly squeeze of her arm, "to make *him* see it. Try to make him see my point of view."

19

Years afterwards she pondered, struggling hard with memory, upon the events of those summer days, and tried to think out what really *did* happen, and whether John or Michael or even she herself were most of all to blame. But she could not remember much. Curious incidents came into her mind, but hardly anything logical or connected. All the time, she knew, she had been fighting Michael, fighting him instinctively, lest he should possess too much of her. Yet it was all (even the fighting) so remote, so unsubstantial, so impossible to analyze or explain. When, for example, he said to her one evening in the meadows: "Fran, this is only light-opera love-making—Strauss—or Puccini. . . . But beyond it is Mozart . . . and beyond that—infinitely beyond that—Beethoven. . . ."

She tried to fight him, but she did not know where to fight. He attacked where she least expected it, and after she had fought a battle she did not know whether she had won or lost. For a while she felt that loving him physically was least of all, a transient unimportant thing that hardly mattered. But by degrees she felt her mind stir with her body to meet him; and then, after that, something farther off still, something deeper than mind or body.

Yet—and she kept this well in the fore-front of her vision—it all meant nothing. If he had proposed to her she would have burst into incredulous laughter. Marriage—with Micky?

How absurd! How absurd to think of Micky ever marrying anybody! And besides, *she* did not want to marry.

The days passed, and nothing seemed to happen except the development of this extraordinary relationship, half game, half idyll. John, as usual, was cordial and polite; Nan, as usual, was completely ignorant of all that was happening; Michael, as usual, could not be persuaded even to think about the future. John had fixed the beginning of September as a time-limit, and it was unlikely that he would not keep his word. Michael also was adamant. He would not give way. He would not apologize. He would not promise anything. He would not accept a post in the tannery office, or in any other office. He would not even discuss his future with John.

"He's trying to make me, Fran," he told her, "but I just refuse to discuss the matter. Lord—you should see his face when he can't get a word out of me. He can't stand not being argued with."

"And, after all, Fran, if *I* don't give in, *he'll* have to. That's obvious, isn't it? He can't have me absolutely physically thrown out of the house—I believe even Nan would put her foot down against that. And besides, there'd be a scene—and he hates scenes. . . ."

Over a week passed and still nothing happened. Once she asked John point-blank: "What are you going to do about Micky? It's September now, you know."

And his answer, calm and friendly as ever, was: "Don't worry. I am going to do just what I think best in the circumstances."

20

And then one morning during the second week of the month she came downstairs to find the breakfast-table laid for two only. She called the maid's attention and received the reply: "Mr. John told me there'd only be two this morning."

Almost instantly a storm of suspicion assailed her. She ran upstairs immediately and knocked at Michael's bedroom. There was no answer. Then she turned the handle and gazed in upon an empty room and a bed that had not been used.

Suspicion grew in her to panic. She ran back along the corridor to Nan's room. "Micky's not in his room," she cried, shrilly, "and his bed's not been slept in. Where is he? Do you know anything about it?"

Nan rubbed her eyes sleepily. "John will tell you," she said, rather sadly. "John will tell you."

"John—John—he's gone to the tannery as usual. . . ." A curious premonition of catastrophe broke in then upon her mind. "I want to know *now*—and *you* know, Nan—that's why you're so calm about it. Tell me—tell me—what's been happening. . . ."

"I don't know. . . . I don't know any more than you. But John says it's all right. He'll tell you when he comes home."

"He'll tell me?" Her voice became suddenly calm. "Yes, he'll tell me. And he'll tell me now—as soon as I can get down to the works."

"Fran, I think I'd wait if I were you——"

But she was already out of the room and half-way along the corridor—a different, determined woman, now that it was too late.

CHAPTER TWO

JOHN

1

The next train to town was the 9.10, which allowed her ample time for getting to the station. She might have telephoned for a cab, but she did not think of doing so; she just put on a hat and coat and ran out of the house and over the meadows to the lane.

The haze of the morning heat was like a pall over the fields; the sky was grey with filtered sunshine, and the smell of the grass, warm and damp, rose up to her cloyingly as she passed. She reached the station ten minutes too soon, and those ten minutes of fretful inactivity were the most dreadful of all. She felt calmer when she had settled herself in the corner-seat of the express, and the quiet red-roofed villages were slipping by in a drowsy procession—Crole, Basset, Cressington, Great Haverland, Rooks Fellingham—all teeming to her with memories of Michael.

She tried to arrange in her memory all that had happened on the previous evening. John, she remembered, had not been home to dinner; and Michael had gone out afterwards, ostensibly for a walk in the gardens. She would have gone with him but for leaving Nan by herself. . . . Michael had

returned about half-past nine, looking rather moody; she had asked him what was the matter, and he had mentioned a headache. They had all gone to bed soon after that, leaving John to come in when he chose. . . .

She took a taxi at Liverpool Street. Bermondsey, like Patchley, was drowsing in the heat, but it was a different sort of heat and a different sort of drowsiness. It was a stifling, strangling heat, saturated with smells and dust and discord; the drowsiness was an illusion, for the sleeping cats and motionless street-corner loungers were the outposts of an immense and swarming interior activity. And over it all the sun glowed opaquely, as through a film of incredibly dirty muslin.

She went straight to the office that faced the tannery-yard, in which carts of blood-streaked pelts were drawn up to be unloaded. Here she met John's secretary; he told her that John was somewhere on the premises and promised to fetch him immediately.

She waited in the small ante-room of the office. The window faced the yard, but she dared not look out; the sight of the pelts had already sickened her. More and more each moment she found herself on Michael's side, even though it was too late; she could understand now why he had refused to accept a post in such a place. She wondered how even John could endure it. The whole district seemed to her a lewd and hideous nightmare.

Then the door opened and John faced her. . . . He smiled, and his smile looked to her the smile of unspeakable victory. "You've come about Michael, haven't you?" he began, before she had time to say even a word. "I half expected you would. Well, you can relieve your mind of any natural anxiety. Michael's quite well and safe, and going, I hope, to alter his way of living and make amends for——"

"Where is he?" she interrupted sharply. "Tell me that."

He answered, with supreme calmness: "That is just what I am not going to tell you or anybody else for the time being. I'm sorry, but it has to be so. . . . Now come into my private office and make yourself comfortable."

2

Curious, perhaps, that even amidst her bitterest hostility to John, she yet believed him implicitly. His telling her at the outset that Michael was safe and well had lifted a heavy anxiety from her mind, and her relief, so sudden that it amounted almost to buoyancy, gave her power to be angry. A sharp rage broke over her, and she cried vehemently: "Yes, I *will* come into your private office, and I'll not leave it till I know exactly where Micky is. So you can be prepared for that."

And he replied quietly: "I am always prepared for anything."

Then the storm lowered. She preceded him into the office, crying furiously as she did so: "You think you can do too much on your own! You treat your mother and me as though we simply didn't exist."

"Not at all. . . . Mother, at any rate, is quite sure that I am acting for the best."

"Poor, weak thing—I suppose she is. She daren't call her soul her own."

"Listen now!" He closed the door behind him and spoke authoritatively. "Sit down and calm yourself. If you'll give me a chance I'll tell you everything—except the mere name of the place where Michael is."

"That means you'll tell me everything except what I've come here to find out."

"Listen. . . ." He scratched his head with a gesture of

mingled suavity and exasperation. "Listen now. . . . I'm going to be as frank as I can be. . . ."

He talked. Heavens—how he talked. . . . He talked in the easy, perfectly-controlled, perfectly fluent language which he might have used in addressing a trades-union deputation or a board meeting. He made few gestures, except an occasional slight raising of the eyebrows; most of the time he was half-sitting on the desk edge, with one leg on the seat of the chair. He began by saying that he had been very much worried about Michael. The matter of the books was a small one in itself, but important in principle.

"I really couldn't let him stay at Oxford unless he promised to keep within his allowance. And he flatly defied me. . . . Really, Fran, he defied me all along—in sheer wantonness, it seemed to me. I don't blame him for not wanting to work here." He waved a hand over the room. "It's not a very pleasant place unless you're keen on the business, as I am. . . . So—in the end—I got him the offer of a good berth abroad—in the colonies—a real man's job—hard work, but in ideal open-air surroundings. Something that'll be the making of him, if he uses his chances. I also offered him a free passage out and a hundred pounds pocket-money. At first he wouldn't hear of it, but I'm glad to say that at last—late last night, as a matter of fact, he told me he'd give it a trial."

"So you immediately thought it necessary to smuggle him out of the house?"

"Why should you put it in that way? The time of the boat's sailing made everything rather hurried. He had to catch a midnight train. . . . Passport and other details I am arranging myself to-day."

"So he is still in England?"

"As I said before, I'm not going to say where he is."

"And you let him go—you made him go—to the other side

of the earth—God knows where—without seeing us—Nan and me—without us having a chance to know—to say good-bye."

"That was at his own special request. He said he wanted to go away without seeing anybody at all."

She buried her face in her hands and was silent. She was too miserable to cry. Relief at learning of Michael's safety had now spent itself, and all the rest was a blank misery that was almost physical in the pain it inflicted. She saw that John had won, and that his victory was complete and absolute. And Michael had surrendered.

"I'll go now," she said, rising.

He nodded and went to the telephone. "I hope you won't think—when you've thought it all out—that I've treated Michael unfairly."

She even laughed—a wild little laugh that made him stop suddenly as he was giving the number into the telephone. And he said: "Think it over—think it over when you're calm—ask yourself whether it isn't going to be rather a good thing for him in the end. . . . I didn't bully him into going—don't think that. He just accepted my offer, that was all. . . . Think it over on your way home. . . . I've sent for a taxi for you."

Two hours later she was back at Patchley, striding miserably through the blazing, empty meadows. The sun was high in the sky, and hardly a whisper of wind stirred the long grasses. She was thinking it over, thinking it over—and the result—a dim, infinite despair that wore down even anger.

3

Michael had left no message of any sort. For days afterwards she did not give up the idea that he might have hidden a letter somewhere about the house, or made arrangements for her to receive some kind of message from him. Then,

when at last she was forced to give up all hope of that, the strangeness, the almost unbelievable strangeness, of what had happened attacked her with such force that she was dazed rather than hurt. Everything seemed incomprehensible; at times she found it literally impossible to believe that Michael had gone away. She felt she had only to shout "Micky—Micky" at the foot of the staircase to have him bounding towards her.

But perhaps the most curious thing of all was that she endured it almost without further protest. She felt often, while John was away at business during the daytime, that the whole situation was intolerable, and that she could break it instantly by merely insisting on learning what she had every right to learn. Yet, somehow, when John did come home, he was always so suave and good-humoured; and his attitude half-hypnotized her into believing that it was she and not he at all who had been unreasonable. And Nan certainly thought so.

But worst of all was the sadness of wanting Michael and not being able to have him. She had grown so used to him, to his voice and the music he played, and his sudden shy smile, and his body pressed warmly to hers, that the ache for him was a white-hot blend of the physical and the mental—something from which neither calmness nor excitement could give her release.

One evening, about a week after Michael's departure, John said: "Michael's on his way to Australia, Fran. I'm sorry you couldn't know before. . . . Perhaps you'd like me to tell you all about the sort of place he's going to."

She felt passionately angry with him. Yet after a pause she answered quietly: "Yes, I should certainly be interested. Please tell me."

He talked to her then about a certain sheep-farm in Queensland, run by a tough old Scotsman, who had been formerly a

foreman at the tannery. "Michael will have hard work and good treatment, and he'll soon find himself much better off than he would have been in England. After all, in England, there's every encouragement to dabble in things, and in the colonies practically none. Dabbling—the worst thing a young man can do—a bit of piano-playing—a bit of writing—a bit of something else. . . ."

She smiled pathetically and said: "I'd like to write to him. Will you give me his address?"

"Certainly, I will. Certainly. . . . I'll give it to you this minute if you like. . . ." He wrote it out on a post-card for her and then took hold of her gently by the arm. "Here it is . . . only, please—please think very carefully before you send your letter. Remember—he's got a magnificent chance in front of him, and it would be a pity if it were all to be smashed up by the sort of letter you—you *might* write."

All she answered was, very wearily: "But you don't know the sort of letter I *might* write."

She was too tired to say any more. She felt, as she always felt after talking with John, the crushing and overwhelming reasonableness of all that he said and did. She was not angry with him. Yet when the conversation was over and she was alone in her room, the anger swelled up in a sharp and passionate outburst—an anger directed principally against herself. Why *had* she been so calm and meek? Why *had* she allowed herself once again to be impressed by John's stale old trick of sweet reasonableness? Why had she ever allowed Michael to leave England at all—why had she not demanded right from the beginning that John should tell her what was happening? Good God, when she examined the past, what *had* Michael done to deserve all this? Bought a few rather expensive books at Oxford. . . . And the punishment—exile to the other side of the earth. . . . It was monstrous, absurd, ridiculous—and, above

all, a mountainous injustice. And yet she had almost beguiled herself into accepting the inevitability of it! She suddenly ran out of her room downstairs, with eyes aflame with determination; she would find John now, instantly, and have it out with him. No more sweet reasonableness. No more meekness. . . .

But John was out, and Nan sat dozing in one of the library chairs. The whole house seemed bathed in submissive, satisfied tranquillity.

4

Anyhow, there was no need to write the sort of letter that John would wish her to write. She hurried back to her room and wrote a letter of burning, eager protest, telling Michael (how definitely now!) that she was wholly on his side, that John had had no right to send him away, and that if he were unhappy he must come back immediately, trusting to her to make all arrangements for him. . . . She wrote it, sealed the envelope, and addressed it, and then, at the last moment, doubted. If he could have read it just then, while the ink was hardly dry, she would not have cared. But it would be over two months before it reached him, and by that time. . . .

Perhaps also, as John had said, he *had* a chance before him.

She destroyed the letter and wrote another which was to have had a calm and affectionate tone, with just a faint undercurrent of protest. But inspiration, which had yielded the earlier letter so effortlessly, refused suddenly to function at all; and in the end the letter was no more than a friendly note, as short and casual as if Michael had been away on a week's holiday.

What a dreadful thing the distance was! If he did not reply till he received her letter, she would have to wait four months. It was possible, of course, that he might write from Colombo,

where his boat touched, but she was not hopeful, and by the time October was in its twenties she knew that he had not written. Incidentally, he was a bad letter-writer, and she knew from experience the sort of thing to expect—a half-sheet of note-paper beginning with a tolerably written "Dear Fran," and ending with a vilely-scribbled "Micky". . . .

The whole pageant of the gradually-unfolding autumn seemed mystically in tune with her own state of mind. Every morning when she looked out of her bedroom window the lawns were carpeted afresh with leaves, and the leaves fell on her like rain when she walked out of the house towards the meadows. They were everywhere, the leaves; they blew in through the library window and settled on the desk and piano; they heaped themselves in the roadside ditches, and the rains came and soaked them into the earth. John, riding daily in his car, did not notice these things; it was she, left alone at Sky Peals with Nan, who could see the full splendour of decay.

She tried to resume her work in economic history, but the issues seemed curiously unreal; she could hardly get any grip on them; she found herself sitting vacantly with the books in her hand, reading the pages mechanically without comprehending a word. Except for household duties, which did not occupy more than a small fraction of her time, there was nothing which she did with ease. But the daily reckonings of bills and orders to tradesmen gave her a certain satisfaction, because they had to be done, whether she felt inclined for them or not. They were a link with the world of reality, amidst this world of her own which was compounded of the strange and the shadowy.

As time passed the shadows deepened. At twilight on roaring autumn afternoons the house took on the awful clarity of a dream; she felt towards it as towards some woefully enchanted castle; the meadows were pale and haunted, and the

high trees, moaning in the wind, seethed with grey ghosts. Nan seemed more than ever the half-embodiment of futility; she roamed aimlessly about the house, always eager and anxious to talk about John, but never, it appeared, even remembering Michael.

It was not, Fran decided, that she had been in love with Michael, but that he had given her a love for other things, for music and delicacy and beauty, and that the love she felt for these was now a throbbing and mournful ache.

The one cheery event in the whole long day was John's return in the evening. Deep and instinctive as was her grievance against him, she yet looked forward to his coming because it dissipated her mood of unreality. She hated John's world of prices and costs and percentages, but for all that there was a vitality in it, a fierce, pulsating matter-of-factness that aroused her instant hostility. And it was sweet relief to be hostile after being sad.

John (so it always seemed to her) came into Sky Peals every night like a pert and carefully-controlled tornado. The tornado first cleared away all the stale and languid ghosts. Then it whirled around Nan, transforming her futility into a grovelling, yet thoroughly alive worship. Last of all, it approached *her,* and she fought it keenly, zestfully, till the fight made her tingle with the beginnings of joy.

That was why, when November came, and there was still no news from Michael, she asked John if he could find her some sort of work in his office. It seemed an extraordinary request, both to him as he heard it and to her as she made it. "But I really do mean it, John. I get so miserable here all day. I should like the change, and I'm sure Nan wouldn't mind."

"But your history work——" he began.

"Oh, *that.* That's all done with—for the time being. I can't

get my mind to it, and it's no use trying. Give me some plain, straightforward job, like adding up figures or copying letters. I can typewrite, by the way."

"But your work here—in the house—surely——"

"Oh, yes, I can do all that in the mornings before I leave. I could catch the 11.05 to town. Oh, please—*please* help me—I want something to do—something to do——"

After a short pause he answered: "Very well. Come up to-morrow morning by the 11.05. We'll decide on your salary when we know what you're worth."

5

There was no slacking in John's office. She did not mind this; rather, indeed, the contrary. It saved her from the feeling she had so often had before—that desire to get outside time, as it were, and *push* the dull days on, one after the other. . . .

John treated her during office-hours exactly as he treated all his other employees—firmly and courteously, that is, without either brusqueness or familiarity. Only after six o'clock, when the sirens blew and the staff departed, did he unbend. He had bought a new high-powered car that enabled him to dispense with the railway, and they drove home together as a rule, leaving the tannery shortly after six and arriving at Sky Peals about eight. Not even during the journey was he idle. He usually read letters or studied trade and financial papers; sometimes he even dictated correspondence. Occasionally he sent the chauffer home by train during the afternoon and drove the car himself. He liked to make considerable and unorthodox detours through dismal and unattractive suburbs. "One ought to learn one's London," he told her, "and this is the best way."

She felt a strange sense of security during those rides home

in the closed limousine. They were by far the calmest moments of her day; she loved the whistle of the chill air as they crossed London Bridge into the thronged streets of the City. Beyond Liverpool Street Station she hardly ever knew where they went; John had a road-map at his elbow (how different from Michael, whose habit had been to drive anywhere and then ask passers-by where he was!) and he guided the car dexterously through labyrinths of side streets, where here and there the glare of a public-house or fried-fish shop threw a passing brilliance into the softly glowing interior. There was a strange witchery in those cold, clear winter evenings, and in the swift progress through the City and the slums and the suburbs and thence into the heart of the black countryside. John rarely spoke while he was driving. Often she stared for moments at a time at his rather homely profile, surprised that she could feel so completely comfortable in the presence of a person whose ideas she rather disliked.

After she had been working at the office for nearly six weeks, he said to her one morning, with his usual mixture of curtness and courtesy: "I've decided to double your salary. You're worth it." She felt then perhaps the first pang of actual positive pleasure that had touched her since Michael had been away. Even the bleak tannery-yard did not seem quite so desolate when she looked out upon it after that.

Not long afterwards he presented her with a pair of shoes made from a certain new kind of "cord" leather that he was beginning to market. He had just bought a boot-factory at Northampton, and this was the first completed pair of shoes turned out. When she had put them on and was walking about the office in them he was almost like a child in his naïve excitement, bombarding her with eager queries as to how they fitted, if they were warm, comfortable, felt "smart," and so on

She had never seen him like it before. Almost, for a fraction of a second, he reminded her of Michael.

Nor could she keep back a certain growing pride in the enterprise of which she had now become a part. Not only was John's keenness infectious, but she began to feel herself bound up in a living organism; she saw every day the firm prospering, spreading, pushing out tentacles of growth and development; and she knew and hoped that her work was contributing to it all. The whole thing was big enough to fill a void within her; she became interested, curious, almost fascinated. Once when she was in the library at home reading over a leather-trade journal, she saw Nan smiling quietly at her. And at last Nan said: "Are you keen about it, Fran?"

She replied, with a certain embarrassment: "Well, yes—I think I'm beginning to be. But why?"

The tired, half-sad voice did not answer her question, but went on: "Perhaps now, Fran, you realize why *I* rely so much on John. Even you are beginning to rely on him a little, aren't you? And you're beginning to love running about for him, obeying him, doing all sorts of little things to please him—aren't you?"

Fran answered: "I'm paid a salary to work for him, and I have to earn it."

"Yes, but——"

"No, no—there aren't any 'buts,' Nan. I certainly do try to please John, but I don't pretend to obey him except in business affairs, and I never intend to. I happen to have a will of my own."

"I know. That's why John likes you so much."

"Like me—so much?" She felt herself flushing, with pleasure, embarrassment, indignation even—all mingled inextricably. "Does he—*does* he like me?"

Nan resumed the reading of her magazine. "Yes, he does. . . . But perhaps I oughtn't to have told you."

6

Christmas came, and still no letter from Michael, though John had heard that he had arrived in Queensland. Fran had hoped so little that she was hardly even disappointed; the quiet, half-melancholy beginnings of happiness were stealing over her, and the more she thought of Michael the more the melancholy and the happiness merged together into a kind of hazy tranquillity. She was quite sure that Michael had forgotten her; he was one of those sudden, transient beings whom fate entirely ruled—so different from John, who carved his own fate relentlessly as he went along.

Not that she had forgotten Michael. Whenever she walked about the gardens or through the meadows to the lane, and whenever she heard the distant murmur of a piano, memories of him stormed at her; but they could not make her sad; she had been already saturated with the poignancy of losing him.

Besides, there was her work at the tannery, absorbing her energies and even occupying her thoughts during leisure moments. And there was John. . . . She was really beginning, not exactly to like him, still less to agree with all that he did, but to admire him, reluctantly, even, at times, contemptuously. When she heard him arguing with a deputation of workmen, arguing so plausibly, so mellifluously, and all the time twisting the men round his finger and getting just what he wanted—she admired him then, in a sort of way. When he bought a second-hand garden roller, and beat down the price from five pounds to three pounds ten with as much enthusiasm as if each shilling had been a pound—she admired him then, in a sort of way. And when one night he stopped the car during

the journey home, bought there and then a shop that he happened to see for sale, and sold it the week after for nearly double the price—she admired him then also, in a sort of way.

But there was another sort of way in which she admired him. . . . When he heard that any one of his employees, even the humblest or the latest-comer, had suffered domestic trouble, he would always make it his business to find out all the circumstances, to interview the man personally, and then to give him, not merely sympathy, but practical financial help. He told her proudly that it was a tradition of the firm to do this. "My father knew all his men by their Christian names, and so did his father before him. As he used to walk through Bermondsey it was, 'How d'ye do, Bob?'—'How's the boy getting on, Fred?'—that sort of thing, all the way. . . . I've seen him, when I was a small boy, sitting down by the tanning-pits and chatting to the men about their wives and families just as if they were all intimate friends. . . . But you can't do that nowadays. The whole spirit of the age is against it. But there are some things even to-day that you *can* do, if you take the trouble, and I try to do them." She admired him for that.

Certainly the more she knew him the more she admired him (she would not admit to liking him). He was always fair-minded, even-tempered, cool-headed. To servants he was the perfect master, firm, fair, and considerate. She never forgot a certain wintry afternoon when they were both standing on the terrace and saw John's best car, driven by Martin, encounter a cow that rushed suddenly across the drive from a gate that had been left open. Martin, in trying to avoid the animal, half-capsized the car into a ditch, and the sound of shattered glass and splintered woodwork showed that damage was considerable.

Two minutes later Martin, white as chalk, was standing in front of John. But John did not wait for him to speak.

"I saw what happened, Martin," he said quickly. "It wasn't your fault. . . . Come inside and have a whisky."

The man looked at John speechlessly, adoringly almost, as if he would have died for him. And Fran felt that if ever she were tempted to dislike John she would remember the look on that man's white face.

She knew also that at Bermondsey there were other men who sometimes looked at John like that—men whom John had helped, or to whom he had been fair when the rest of the world had been unfair.

There was another incident that she would never forget. She felt ill one afternoon at the office, and John insisted on going home with her. It was just after the accident to the car; the repairs were still unfinished, so they had to travel by rail. During the tedious journey by a train that stopped at all stations she thought that he looked perhaps a trifle worried, though he talked no differently from usual. At Patchley he took a cab, and on arriving at Sky Peals left her for about an hour. When he returned she saw that his right hand was encased in bandages.

"Just a little accident," he explained easily. And when she demanded further information he added: "Nothing at all to worry about. . . . When the porter slammed the door at Liverpool Street my hand happened to be in the way. I didn't want to worry you coming along."

Two of his fingers were rather badly crushed, and the pocket of his coat in which he had hidden them during the journey was drenched in blood.

Things like that counted. Perhaps they oughtn't to have done. It was true, of course, that he couldn't help being calm, and that his ability to endure physical pain was temperamental, like a taste or a fad. Yet she could not, for that reason, forbear to admire it.

One result of his accident was that he could not write for many weeks, and that she had therefore to do for him a great deal of extra secretarial work, not only at the office, but at Sky Peals in the evenings. But she did not mind. In his office-like, but quite comfortable study, she spent many busy hours which would have been no more enjoyable spent any other way. And one dark January night, while a great gale was blowing, he said to her, when she had finished and was putting the cover on her machine: "There's just one other matter, if you can spare a moment."

"Yes?"

He leaned against the edge of the desk and folded his arms. "It's a private and personal matter—rather more than business. . . . I don't know if I'm altogether wise in mentioning it. You may wish I hadn't. Anyhow . . ."

"Yes?"

He refused to be hurried. He went on, more slowly and cautiously than ever: "The fact is—for some time past—I have had in my mind—to—to ask you—if you would care to—to marry me. Now *would* you? That's the point."

She was completely and overwhelmingly astonished. She felt herself going cold from shock, and then suddenly warm again; a tingling glow enveloped her, and she tried hard to fight it down, for it made her dizzy when most of all she wanted to be calm and clear-headed. And John, still leaning nonchalantly against the table, was as unperturbed as if he were addressing the most respectful of shareholders' meetings.

"I—I really—don't—don't think—I would," she said at last, and the effort of speaking only those few words made her feel so surprisingly weak and helpless that she was relieved to see him smiling at her.

"Well, of course," he answered, "it's rather too early to expect a definite answer, isn't it? You must think it over—

think it over. Don't worry yourself about it, though, whatever you do." He strode to the door and held it open for her, adding: "If, after you've thought it over, you say 'no' to me, you needn't fear that I shall ever mention it again."

7

But she could not help worrying about it. At first, the matter seemed so easy to decide; she did not love him, and therefore she certainly could not marry him. Yet, when she pondered further, she wondered if she did love him, just a little; at any rate, the thought of marrying him did not arouse in her that keen and immediate disrelish that would have settled the matter once and for all. She even felt that marriage with John would be, in a sort of way, rather splendid; to have his strength and relentless capacity behind one, always, a permanent background to life, was not without its attraction. Yet, on the whole, she was unwilling rather than willing. Her unwillingness was just strong enough to make her wish devoutly that he had not given her the problem to solve. She knew that if she refused him there would be moments afterwards when she would wish she hadn't.

The next evening after dinner she called him to her, unaware that he had an appointment elsewhere. "Why not come with me?" he said. "I'm only going over to Ranger's Farm. . . . Yes, *do* come."

She went with him. The ground was freezing hard, and in the cold sky the stars shone like ice. He talked to her for a while about Ranger and his farm, and about his own desire to add by degrees to the estate surrounding Sky Peals; then, when they reached the meadows, he paused, as if to give her an easy opening to say whatever she wished.

Somehow the meadows, with all their teeming memories of

Michael, made it easier for her to speak her message. She was glad he had brought her to the meadows, for there, of all places, the very earth and sky were against him.

"I've been thinking," she began slowly, "about what you asked me yesterday. And—I'm afraid—I really can't marry you—because—because—I don't love you." She added, as a kind of despairing after-thought, the word "enough."

As always, he seemed quite unperturbed. "Why then, that settles it, eh?" he said smiling. He squeezed her arm reassuringly and went back to the topic of Ranger's Farm. He talked smoothly, interestingly, just as if he really had put the other and greater matter outside his mind. His calm fluency puzzled her almost to exasperation; he really was *too* perfect.

Soon they reached the edge of the Sky Peals property, and a short walk farther across a few fields brought them to the small, lamp-lit farmhouse. Ranger, a benign old man of about sixty, was evidently expecting John; he gave both of them a cordial welcome and invited them into his low-roofed, age-smelling parlour, packed full of all the hideous gimcrackery of the Victorian era.

Chiefly, to Fran, the interview was a revelation of John. He seemed almost to get hold of Ranger by the soul; in five minutes the two were gossiping like farmers at a country fair. But all the time she could see that John was getting the other completely in his grip, was twisting him this way and that, was putting him carefully and neatly into a certain mood. Ranger offered John a glass of ale and herself one of lemonade; she was surprised to see John drink the ale, for usually he was an abstainer. At the end of half-an-hour the deal was arranged; John bought Ranger's farm for twelve hundred guineas.

"Cheap," he confessed to her on the way home. "I was prepared for at least fifteen hundred. Old Ranger's a decent

sort, but not much of a business man, I'm afraid. Seems fond of his glass of ale. I think I'll send him a barrel as an Easter gift."

The meadows, when they came to them again, were white with frost, and once again she felt that they protected her from John, made her less eager to please, more reluctant to admire. Yet even still a sort of admiration squirmed its way through, especially when he talked to her about the farm, and what he was going to do with it, and how the methods he proposed to adopt would mean better conditions for the farm-labourers; it was almost possible to feel that the end could justify the means. And once she accepted that, even in part, a feeling for him arose in her that certainly was not love, but might have been almost anything else.

8

During the dark, full weeks of February and March the routine of business engulfed both her and him. He treated her exactly as he had always treated her, without a breath of change. Towards the end of March he went away on business to Scotland. She missed him during his absence; it was lonely in the office without him, and lonelier still in the car on the journey home. She had hardly realized how much his company had become a part of her life.

But it was on his return that realization came to her most curiously. She thought she detected a change in him then—slight, hardly indeed perceptible, yet sufficient to betray a weakening of his regard for her. She began to notice things of unbelievable unimportance; whether he nodded to her when he went out of the office, whether he said "please" when he gave her some duty, whether his smile seemed to her grudging or cordial. She knew the ridiculousness of it, yet she could not

help observing such minutiæ and attaching significance to them; and, on the whole, it seemed from their flimsy evidence that he was slightly displeased with her.

Under the shadow of this perhaps only imagined displeasure she was acutely miserable. It was as if she had been leaning against something and it had suddenly given way. She had the same sickening sensation of falling, of losing her balance, of not knowing what dreadful thing might happen to her. . . .

At last she had to tell him. It was a bitterly cold evening; it had been fine during the afternoon, and John had sent the chauffeur home by train, preferring to drive himself on a night that would be full of bright moonlight. But towards dusk rain began, the dull, pitiless rain that lets itself be lashed by the wind like a dead thing. John hated driving through rain; he telephoned home that he and Fran would have dinner in town. They drove in a taxi through the squelching mud of Bermondsey into the more disciplined mud of the West End, and after a quiet dinner at a quiet hotel drove back again to the works. John's hope that the rain would have ceased was not fulfilled; on the contrary, it was raining harder than ever. "Have to put up with it," he said grimly, as he nodded to the watchman and drove the car out of the tannery-yard.

It was not till they were far in the country, beyond Crole, that the overmastering desire to tell him came upon her. The headlights illumined nothing but a cascade of raindrops; the road was greasy, and John, careful always, was driving very slowly. She said suddenly, after a long silence: "John—I want to speak to you. . . . Do you mind stopping?"

It was typical of him that he just nodded and drove on a few hundred yards farther to a spot where there was room to pull up out of the way of traffic.

"Now," he said, as the wheels slid to a standstill on the soft mud. "I'm ready."

On the roof the rain pattered noisily; it lashed against the side windows, and some of the drops trickled inside and rolled down the panes on to the upholstery. A car passed with headlights that seemed to engulf the whole firmament in conflagration. In the sharp instant blaze she saw John's face more clearly; he was watching her.

"I want to tell you," she said quietly, "that—I—I've thought it over—and I—I've decided that—that I—I *do* love you—rather. . . ."

Afterwards she wondered dimly what she had expected him to say or do. Perhaps least of all she had expected him to be angry. Yet that was what, if anything, he seemed. "I told you not to worry about it," he said.

His attitude gave her serene confidence; it aroused just that brisk tonic hostility to him that she loved and that, somehow, more than anything else, made her love him. "You needn't be so confoundedly casual," she answered. "You asked me to marry you some time ago, and if the offer still holds, I'll accept it. That's all."

"Right. A bargain then." And he suddenly restarted the car and drove off without saying another word.

Now that she had delivered herself of the message, she felt perfectly secure; what *he* did or said did not seem to matter. She did not even wish to discuss marriage with him, much less to receive any outward signs of affection; it was enough, for the time being, that her future was settled. She could think of it and of him quite comfortably; it was true that she *did* love him—rather. . . .

As they left the car in the garage at Sky Peals he said to her: "When would it suit you to be married—next month or the month after?"

She was not surprised. She would not have been surprised if he had said: "This week or next?" She replied calmly: "Oh, just as soon as ever you like."

9

The weeks that passed before her marriage were like moments in a dream. She felt that her whole life had turned a corner, had entered a deep roadstead of peace; the atmosphere of Sky Peals took on a passionless serenity, while Nan smiled on everything, and the trees in the garden unfolded their first green hint of spring.

Yet sometimes she would feel a vague and restless sense of unreality, as of the dreamer who half-knows that she is dreaming; she would hurt herself against invisible bars, and then sink back relieved at her own inability to escape. She was to marry John. That future possessed her steadfastly, almost hypnotically; she was to be John's wife, just as she was already John's secretary and John's helper. She would be proud—overwhelmed—to be his wife. She loved his rare, casual tokens of affection; his way of holding her gently by the arm, and his eager, simple assumption that she was interested in everything that interested him. Above all, she loved and could rely on the essential changelessness of him; even the things in him that she disliked had worn away a place in her heart where they could rest without hurting her.

She thought often, amidst the bustling activities of those weeks, that she had never seen him look so young. He was only twenty-seven, and already a well-known man, a captain of industry (how he loathed the phrase!); but she knew more of him than that; she knew his secret youthfulness, his enthusiasm that sometimes, very rarely, escaped control and made him . . . Michael's brother. The hint of likeness vanished always be-

fore she could be sure of it, but the memory stayed, a half-tantalizing fragrance to puzzle and bewitch her.

They were married quietly at Patchley Old Church on an April morning, when shower and sunshine seemed to spring at each other like hounds unleashed. Only a few guests were invited, and after a brief reception at Sky Peals the bride and bridegroom left for a ten days' holiday in the Tyrol. It was as much time as the bridegroom could spare, for he had several important board meetings at the beginning of May.

10

They reached Paris at breakfast-time, after a night journey across the Channel. Neither of them had travelled much; John, in fact, had never been out of England before. Nor could he read or speak any foreign language. A phrase-book, however, appeared to supply all his needs. "Two phrases a business-man *must* know," he told Fran. "There's 'Not enough' if he wants to sell anything, and 'Too much' if he's the buyer. . . . I've learned those, so I'll manage all right."

They stayed the day in Paris, and in the morning hired a car to "do" relentlessly all the chief sights of the city. In the afternoon John kept a business appointment, while Fran spent an absorbed hour in the Louvre. Then, after a leisurely and comfortable dinner, they went to the East Station and caught the Orient express, in which sleeping berths had been reserved for them.

But Fran could not sleep for excitement. At last the calmness, the dreamlike serenity, was dissolving, dissolving with the remorseless clankety-clank of the *wagon-lit* southwards. Behind the curtains of the adjacent berth her husband was asleep; he had the knack of being always able to sleep whenever and wherever he chose; he could will himself to sleep, he had told

her. She pondered vaguely on the uncanniness of the gift, and then on the strangeness, the almost unbelievable strangeness, of her own situation. *Married!* She could hardly get it into her mind. The events of even a day before, the ceremony at the church, the reception at Sky Peals, Nan's tearful farewell, the train journey to Dover, all seemed part of a forgotten and distant world.

The wheels clanked on, stopping now and then at cold, cheerless stations, which she could see dimly by pulling aside the curtains of her window. Chaumont . . . Belfort . . . Mulhausen. . . . Then, towards dawn, the Swiss frontier, and Basle. John had promised to waken her then and take her to the station buffet for early breakfast. Towards seven o'clock she heard him moving.

"Hullo, Fran. . . ."

"Hullo. . . . Where are we?"

"Near Basle, I should think. Get ready."

When the train drew into the platform they stepped out, shivering in the chill morning air. The glass roof of the station was just faintly grey with dawn, and John, with his unwavering instinct for the right thing at the right time, rushed forward to the buffet and ordered breakfast before the rest of the passengers had roused themselves out of their compartments. She thought, as she saw him gesticulating to one of the waiters, how supremely competent he was; he was obviously as completely at home at Basle station as he would have been at Liverpool Street. The language barrier made no difference to him; he just (his own phrase) knew what he wanted and got it.

And now his wants were frankly and wholesomely carnal. By the time that the crowd from the train had sauntered up he was sitting down with Fran to a steaming meal of ham and eggs and coffee. . . . Just time for that, and a cigarette or two, before the bells clanged for the train to move on; they went

aboard and sat by the window, watching the procession of populous villages along the line between Basle and Zürich. Then the sun rose, making the whole scene dance with prettiness, and Zürich appeared to them, gleaming with blue and gold.

The scene grew hilly after that, almost mountainous, yet somehow less imposing than Fran had expected. This was Switzerland, and somehow in Switzerland you expected . . . Then suddenly, at a turn of the line, a vista came into view, a vista of high wooded hills stretching far away to the south-east, and beyond them, at an immense distance, something that gleamed like crystal in the morning sunlight.

By the time they reached Buchs, the frontier station, the mountains were all around them, piling into grey scarred heaps, and seeming to bar the way impenetrably. Then also, while they waited for the customs examination, the sun went in behind heavy rain-clouds, and it was as if the whole earth were frowning. The rain fell, icy from the level of the snows, and John stood out on the open platform, haggling with customs officials, and in the end, judging from their abrupt departure, scoring a complete victory.

11

Three hours later she stood in the sunlit corridor as the train raced down the line from the summit of the Arlberg. She felt as if she had come to the other side of the world; lashed by the rain and the driving icy winds, the Arlberg had been a nightmare of crazy magnificence. But now, though the valley was still hemmed in by towering crystal peaks, the sun was shining, and spring, precociously advanced, had strewn the earth with flowers.

She had never dreamed of such beauty of scene and colour.

As she stood watching in the corridor of the swaying train, she had to struggle against the beauty as if it were some threatening physical enemy; she could not speak—the loveliness was conquering her. John, at her side, was also impressed, but in a different way; he foresaw the time when all the mountain torrents would be harnessed to work power-stations and supply cheap electric power to the distant towns.

Once she leaned her head out of the window, and it seemed to her then that the train was heading for a trackless meadow of wanton, illimitable colour. She could hardly see for the radiance of it, or breathe for the scents of flowers; she drew back her head and cried to John: "Look—*look*—over there!"

He put his head out of the window. "Delightful, isn't it?" he said, briskly, when he looked in again.

It was dusk when they reached Innsbrück. The dreaming, age-mellowed town lay wholly in shadow, but the last sun-rays had streaked the higher snow-slopes in delicate tints of saffron. Amidst the strange, ghostly half-light they crossed the station square to their hotel—a huge, rambling place, like a doge's palace, with long, lofty corridors and a dining salon from which the mountains looked like an immense framed picture.

After dinner they strolled out together into the rich-scented darkness. Innsbrück seemed unlike any other place she had ever seen—and yet she felt that in some wise and secret way she knew it, had almost seen it before. It teemed with ghosts; the very bricks and stones were old enough to be alive. Every step was worn by footsteps, every wall rubbed smooth by hands and shoulders; crazy balconies leaned over the streets, and on the calm air came the childish tinkle of bells. The place was breathing, faintly astir with the treasured life of ages; the very walls, as she passed them, seemed to gather closer to her to see her and probe her secrets. And all at once she knew where she

had seen all this before—in the meadows at Sky Peals, where dwelt this same age-old and tender warmth.

High over the roofs of the town there shone a curious crimson glow; she clutched John's arm and pointed to it. "A star on fire," she whispered.

He laughed. "That's not the sky up there, Fran—that's the mountain—about half-way up. And your burning star is a camp-fire, I suspect."

It was then that she wanted Michael—with a curious, delicate suddenness, as if a flimsy barrier in her soul had very quietly collapsed. The desire for him was deeper than she had ever felt before, far deeper than she had felt just after he had gone away. All this tremulous witchery of night and mountains clamoured to be shared with Michael; to breathe it herself alone was torture. And she knew that, with John beside her, she *was* alone. She could follow him into his world, but he could not follow her into hers.

12

In the bedroom of the hotel she faced her misery squarely and grappled with it. But she could do nothing. It stared at her from the pale and distant snowfields; it was in the moonlight that lay in silver bars across the floor, in every clock-bell that sprinkled the quarters on the sleeping town.

As soon as John came near her she burst into tears. He calmed her in his own way, advancing for her all the excuses he could think of—and there were so many of them. She had slept badly during the two successive nights of travelling; or she was suffering the usual and inevitable reaction after excitement . . . and so on.

"No—not any of that," she answered weakly.

"Go to sleep," he answered. He patted her hand affection-

ately. "In the morning you'll feel perfectly well. You can sleep late and have breakfast in bed."

But the thought of the morning—of there being any morning, almost—drove her to despair. She shook her head. "You don't understand, John. And I don't think you *can*."

"What don't I—and can't I—understand?"

There seemed to her just a faint chance of telling him. She said, carefully: "The exact way—in which—I love you—and—and don't love you. . . ."

She felt his whole body flinch, felt his hand on hers tighten for a fraction of a second, and then relax. "You're tired," he said abruptly. "Too tired to talk. Let me put a light in your room."

"No, no—not yet. I couldn't sleep. John—it's true—what I said. I can't help it—I can't."

"Of course you can't. And after three days and two nights of travelling you wouldn't be likely to succeed if you tried. So don't try. . . . Just go to bed and go to sleep."

"I suppose you think I'm just nervy—and—and excited." Her voice, mournfully reproachful, broke suddenly into sobs. "It's more than that, John—and—and—John—it's going—perhaps—to be dreadful for—for you——"

"Oh, is it? Thanks for warning me." He took her by the arm and guided her to the door that connected their adjoining rooms. He said again, very patiently: "Go to sleep. Good-night, Fran. . . . Sleep now—honest, mind—I'm not joking."

It was his calmness, his sheer mastery of himself, that broke her finally. She felt that he was struggling for her, gently, silently, without pause or mercy. In the doorway his arm, by a subtle movement, made her stop and face him. She gave him one sharp, pleading glance and then caught hold of both his hands. "Don't hate me, John," she cried, leaning towards him. "I'll try to be all you want me to be." And some rising

inward panic made her go on, wildly: "You can do just what you like with me—now—any time—I don't care—I'm yours—I'm not quarrelling over that. . . . Only—somehow—I can't—I can't——"

She would have fallen then, had not his arm been firmly round her. For a long moment he stared vacantly at the ceiling, and then at last, with a just perceptible shrug of the shoulders, answered: "On the whole, Fran, you must think I'm a pretty sort of cad. . . ."

That was all. He picked her up as easily as if she had been a child; he carried her across the room and laid her on her bed. "Sleep," he said, and gave her a little farewell squeeze of the hand.

Then he went back to his own room, switching on the light in hers and closing the dividing door.

13

In the morning she felt different. Sleep had refreshed her, yet in a way she felt tired after it—too tired even to be miserable. Perhaps John was right, and the travelling and night journeys really had exhausted her. She tried to look back upon the evening before, but found it vague, mysterious, and almost wholly inexplicable. What had been the matter with her? And John—what must he have thought? She had the dim recollection that he had been very kind and forbearing.

The sight of the mountains through the windows of the breakfast salon reminded her of something. She said to John, on the impulse of the moment: "I think—I'm frightened of those mountains. It was they that—scared me—last night. I wish—I wish we weren't quite so *underneath* them. . . ."

He answered cheerfully: "Suppose we leave Innsbrück after breakfast? Where would you like to go?"

The thought of leaving the aching, intolerable loveliness gave her instant relief. "Anywhere you like," she replied. "I shall be quite happy."

"There's a place not very far off called Linz. And perhaps, if we went there, I might get a chance of visiting a man I've had correspondence with."

"Linz, then," she agreed eagerly. She really *would* be happy with John—she was certain of it—so long as she never came again under the spell of Innsbrück's heart-dissolving twilight.

They went on to Linz that day, reaching it towards evening. She could see at a glance its attraction for John; it was a semi-industrial town, with many factories. She certainly was not sorry; its atmosphere made her feel more comfortable, more satisfied with herself and with John. And when, as they drove to a hotel, he told her that the friend whom he wanted to visit was the owner of a tannery in the neighborhood, she had an almost irresistible impulse to kiss him. "Why, you'll be nearly as happy here as you would be in Bermondsey!" she cried, laughing. She felt, at any rate, that she would be so herself.

. . . . . .

A week later they returned to England, not through the Arlberg, but by way of Münich and Cologne. During the week they had visited Salzburg and Vienna, had relentlessly "done" the sights of both cities, and had also viewed no fewer than five tanneries. John had been splendid—planning everything with a calm and constant energy that did not allow of a single unoccupied minute. By the end of the week a certain habit had begun to grow upon her—a habit of not only allowing, but expecting, John to do what he liked. It was so pleasant to travel through foreign countries with him; it was refreshing almost; there was a sort of lazy satisfaction in sitting in the comfortable corner of a railway compartment and watching John on the platform in the thick of an argument with some

wildly gesticulating official. John was always so quiet, and everybody else was always so noisy. And, above all, John always won. You couldn't hold out against John. No good trying.

14

The years passed. They were the years during which the world came to hear of the Savage boot. Wherever you went, you could not escape the Savage boot. Its upper, so you were informed from almost every newspaper and hoarding, was made of the finest "cord" leather, and its sole was of "rub-leather," a synthetic compound of rubber and leather that combined the advantages of both commodities. The Savage boot was cool to the feet in summer, never slipped on greasy roads, gave a firm yet resilient tread, was absolutely watertight, and never needed repairing. For the tropics, for polar exploration, for tennis, golf, dancing, and Alpine climbing, there was nothing better than one or other variety of Savage footwear. It cost a little more in the beginning, but in the long run it was the joy of the economical purchaser and the ruin of boot-repairers.

The success—gradual, but overwhelming—of the Savage boot was no mere engineered ramp. The Savage boot really was all (or nearly all) that was claimed for it. And the result, after careful and unblatant advertising, was a business enterprise of such size and scope as would have astonished all the earlier Savages of the dynasty. The Bermondsey tannery had to be extended, new factories were built at Northampton and Leicester, shops were acquired in the West End; the whole thing worked like a well-oiled machine of swift and increasing momentum, with John as engineer, watching for grit as a medieval theologian watched for heresy. For to John wastage —the grit in the machine—*was* heresy.

Even at Sky Peals he could not resist the temptation to extend, organize, and co-ordinate. He bought up neighboring farms, joined them together into huge areas, abolished hedges and field-boundaries, pulled down insanitary labourers' cottages and put up semi-detached brick villas in their place, paid the farmworkers better wages, gave them modern, time-saving machines, installed electric light and electric power . . . and waited for results. The result, during the first year, was a very considerable loss. He smiled over it. "Next year the loss will not be so great," he told Fran, "and perhaps the year after that there won't be any loss at all."

And also he figured in the New Year Honours List. He became *Sir* John. He wasn't personally keen about titles, and his knighthood was in the nature of an experiment. If he found it paid, he would carry on and buy his way further up the titular ladder; otherwise not. . . .

15

During those years he might have added Fran to his conquests almost at any time. She was quite in love with him—not passionately, but with a comfortable acquiescence in whatever he might do with her, and with sometimes a vague resentment at his supreme ability to live with her as a friend and companion merely. She knew that he was waiting for her, waiting until what seemed to him the perfect moment; and his capacity for doing so many things in the meantime fascinated till it almost infuriated. He was always planning something, an extra floor at one of the factories, a new row of labourers' cottages at Crole, a sunken lawn in front of the terrace, or even so domestic a thing as a patent cooking-range for the Sky Peals kitchens. But whatever it was, large or small, it occupied precisely the niche in his mind that he was prepared

to allow it; and she herself (so she felt) was also very accurately niched. Of course the position was a secure one, without worries. In fact, as Nan once said: "To have John near you is like living in the Bank of England." Fran answered, with a wry smile: "Sometimes I feel as if I were married to the Bank of England."

16

Nan, of course, had every reason to be satisfied. John's treatment of her was, indeed, a perpetual miracle of good feeling. He himself was everything that she was not, and she was almost everything that he reckoned to hate most in the world. She was wasteful, unreliable, indolent; yet he merely smiled at her faults and treated them with a half-amused indulgence. The one active thing in her life was her fondness for him, and even that, like everything else, she did not know how to manage. She had sudden moods when she liked to pretend that it was he who ruled the Savage world, yet she who ruled him; she fidgeted miserably about his health, his food, even his underclothing. But he let her, playing the part of the obedient and petted son with good-humoured composure.

Nan was, in fact, a disappointment. She was outwardly almost too beautiful; she was still in her forties, yet she looked at least a dozen years younger; she had a clear, wax-like loveliness that time had not marred, but had only saddened. She aroused such keen and instant expectations; her smile of welcome, so surface-radiant, never failed to kindle the eyes of the stranger meeting her. And Fran, who saw this happen so many, many times, suffered the disillusionment over and over again, and each time more bitterly.

But John, by some curious instinct, knew just how to deal with his mother. When he was away, she was like a ship without anchorage; her talk had a habit of ambling along

amiably and foolishly, and then leaping ahead into impossibility that was to Fran stark and white-hot. Such as, for example, when Nan hinted that John ought to have children. . . . They were half-scared of each other, sensing the remote and intangible hostility that lay between them.

17

One evening Fran was walking homeward across the meadows after a visit to Patchley, when she saw Nan coming to meet her. John was away on business at the time, and her first thought was that some domestic hitch had occurred. "Hullo," she cried, expecting some tedious catalogue of minor misfortune.

But Nan came right up to her and stopped. She looked, Fran thought, exactly like a child that has been hurt and has not quite decided whether to cry or not. There was even a gleam of sharpness in her eyes.

"Fran . . ." she said, and as soon as she spoke she seemed to become breathless. "Fran . . . there's a visitor."

"Well?" There was nothing particularly remarkable in that. "What's she doing now? Have you asked her to stay to dinner?"

"No, no."

"Well, surely, Nan, you haven't left her alone."

"Fran . . . it isn't . . . Fran . . . it's—it's a man. . . ."

"One of John's friends? Didn't you tell him John was in Scotland?"

"No—no—not one of John's friends." She seemed to be involved in some fearful struggle with words.

"Who, then?"

"One of—of my old friends, Fran. . . . An old friend. . . . I hope you don't mind. . . ."

"*Mind?* Why on earth should I mind?"

Nan did not answer. They walked together into the house, and when they were in the cool hall, with the scents of cut flowers all around them, she said "You won't see him—not to-night, Fran. He's—he's gone to bed. He's not well."

Fran stared. "I don't think I quite understand," she answered, after a pause. "You mean that you've asked this man to stay here overnight?"

"Yes . . . and—and I hope—you don't mind. . . ."

She did not reply "Why should I mind?" then. She leaned against the hall-table and pursed her lips. She was puzzled. "Well, tell me who he is," she said at length.

She got the same answer as before. "An old friend of mine."

"Do I know him?"

"No."

"Not even his name?"

"His name's Smith."

"That dosn't convey much." She laughed a short, uneasy laugh and went on, tapping her foot on the floor: "And he's fallen ill? That's rather awkward—especially while John's away. Have you sent for Myles?"

"No, no—I don't think——"

"Oh, but you must, Nan. I think I'll ring him up and ask him to call."

"No, no—there's no need—I'm sure there's no need. It'll look silly——"

"Anyway, what's the matter with—with this friend of yours?"

And the answer came pitifully, grudgingly, like a child's absurd excuse for misbehaviour. "He's—upset. . . . Now don't —oh, please don't—ask me any more questions."

18

As she went upstairs to her room Fran found herself becoming gradually perturbed. Somewhere along that corridor was a bedroom with a man in it—a stranger whom she had never seen, and of whom she had no knowledge at all save that his name was Smith and that he was an old friend of Nan's. The matter would have been almost farcical but for its serious aspect, and Nan herself was its serious aspect. She was so prone to mishandle even the simplest situation that the unusual always suggested the untoward.

In the corridor as she went down to dinner, Fran met Manning. "We've a visitor to-night, haven't we, Manning?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady."

"When did he come?"

"Some time during the afternoon, my lady. I didn't see him arrive myself. He hasn't any—um—considerable luggage. . . . But about four o'clock I was sent for to—to help him to bed."

"He was taken ill, I suppose?"

"If you don't mind me expressing a very personal opinion, my lady, I should say that he was just drunk."

"Drunk?"

"Yes, my lady. Absolutely dead drunk. I know the symptoms." He added: "I don't know what Sir John would think about it. . . ."

She tackled Nan again during dinner. "Look here, Nan. This business is very peculiar. I hate to interfere with your private affairs, but I really do think you ought to tell me more than you have told me."

"What can I tell you?"

"Tell me about this man—this friend of yours. How old

is he? What made him come here? Where and when did you know him?"

"Fran. . . ." She looked thoroughly scared. "Fran . . . you'll see him for yourself to-morrow morning. And I can't—I can't tell you anything now. You must wait. I've arranged everything. He's been put in one of the guest rooms."

"But really. . . . What do you suppose John will think about it?"

"John?" She seemed to ponder, and then answered, with a touch of quiet pride: "John is always—always—very good to me."

"I should think he'd be surprised by this, at any rate. And he'll expect to be told more than you've told me."

"Well, as it happens, John isn't coming back till Friday. There was a wire from him this afternoon saying he would be delayed a day in Glasgow."

"And I suppose your friend will be going to-morrow—is that the idea?"

"I don't know—I can't tell you." Nan almost shouted the words. "I don't know when he's going. You can't ask a man questions when he's—upset. . . . I've told you all I can. . . . Now don't ask me anything else."

. . . . . .

There was a heavy storm during the night, and Fran could not sleep. She was troubled by something new and mysterious in the atmosphere—something strange that had invaded Sky Peals and ruffled its easy, uneventful calm. The morrow loomed like a curtained stage, hiding its secrets until the moment.

CHAPTER THREE

PETER

1

At breakfast she found a place laid for herself alone, and Manning told her that both Nan and the visitor were breakfasting in their rooms.

The delay exasperated her. She sat reading the newspaper for an hour or more after the maid had cleared away, and then she visited the kitchens to attend to household matters. It was towards eleven o'clock when she took a pile of bills into the library for entry into account-books. She walked straight across the room to the writing-desk in the far corner, and began to work with a haste that provided a vague outlet for her exasperation. She wished most fervently that John were back.

After a couple of minutes or so she fancied she could detect the smell of a cigar. She looked round, staring at each section of the large room separately and intensely, and it was only after some time that she observed a single coil of blue smoke rising up from the back of the arm-chair that faced the open French windows.

She rose decisively and walked across the room, but she felt her heart-beat quicken as she neared the chair. And

then, when she came round by the side of it, both her heart and her whole body grew suddenly calm, for the chair held the least terrible thing in the world—an old man sleeping.

He might not be really so very old—perhaps fifty or more—but his attitude, with eyes closed, and short, iron-grey hair moving slightly in the breeze, was somehow full of peace. He looked as if he had come at last to the end of a long and tiresome journey; his legs were sprawled out in front of him, and it was one of his huge hands, resting negligently on his knee, that held the smouldering cigar. Evidently he had not been sleeping for long.

Fran spent at least a whole minute in absorbed and careful contemplation. Then she saw that the cigar was in danger of burning his fingers. She was not in the slightest degree afraid of him now; she touched him fearlessly on the shoulder. He did not move. She touched him again. Still he did not move. The third time she positively shook him.

Then at last he looked up at her with wide blue eyes which, despite a certain bleariness, were distinctly reassuring.

"I beg your pardon," he said, bewilderedly, and his voice, though rather gruff, was reasonably cultured in tone.

"You'll burn yourself," she said, "if you fall asleep with a lighted cigar in your hand."

He glanced at the cigar and smiled—at it rather than at her. "Thank you," he said at last, looking up again. Then he added, suddenly: "Are you—Fran?"

"I am Lady Savage," she replied, with an indignation that was quite bracing now that she had no fear of him. Usually she disliked people who insisted on giving her her title, but she felt she had a right to demand it from a total stranger who preferred to call her by her Christian name.

The stranger laughed quietly and said: "Yes, of course, I —meant that."

She had to smile. There was no resisting his cordial invitation to do so. But she would not let him get the upper hand of the conversation; she would guide it into channels safer for herself. "I hope you are better now," she remarked. "They tell me you were ill last night."

He shook his head. "Lady Savage," he answered, "'ill' is a kind word. To be quite frank, I am thoroughly ashamed of myself for what happened. . . . Your—your mother—very kindly offered me whisky—and I am sorry to say that—that I drank a very great deal more than was good for me. That was my 'illness,' and I hope that during the rest of the time I am here——"

"Perhaps you could tell me how long you propose to stay?" she interrupted, with distinct sarcasm.

He puffed tranquilly at his cigar. "I really haven't the slightest idea. Your—mother has very generously asked me to stay as long as ever I please, so that——"

But at that moment the door opened and Nan herself came into the room. He did not finish his sentence.

2

She came across the room like a delicate white queen, and Fran saw the man's eyes gleam with eagerness as he watched her. For a moment she forgot that he had known Nan before, and she felt sorry for him, because she knew how, in the long run, he would be disappointed.

"Peter. . . . Are you ready? The car's waiting."

Fran stared at both of them in astonishment. Where were they going? Nan was not dressed for a town visit, and, in any case, if the man were leaving that morning, why had he not said so?

The man rose. When he stood up at his full height, he

commanded admiration, for he was tall and magnificently built, and his head, well-shaped and thrown back finely from the shoulders, was the real crown of him.

"I'm ready," he said. He bowed slightly and added smiling: "No doubt I shall have the pleasure of meeting Lady Savage again some other time."

Then he followed Nan out of the room, taking one immense stride to her two shorter ones. At the door she said: "You told me you could drive a Wolseley, didn't you?"

3

All that day Fran wrestled with the problem that had arisen so strangely and suddenly. She paid a visit to the garages, but Martin could not tell her very much. "Mrs. Savage came here about eleven o'clock, my lady, and asked for the Wolseley. I told her it was quite ready, and asked where she wanted me to take her. But then she said I needn't come at all, as she was going out with a friend who knew how to drive. . . ."

"She didn't say where she was going?"

"She did not, my lady. And I don't quite like it, either. 'Tisn't everybody who drives a car knows how to drive one properly, and if it was to come back badly treated . . . I'm not sure Sir John would care for it being lent at all, even. . . ."

She tried to reassure him, but she felt uneasy herself, especially about the car. It was just like Nan to have so casually entrusted it into a stranger's hands. Of course if there were a mishap John would never grumble. He never would grumble at anything that Nan did. But the fact that he would regard his mother's slackness so philosophically made Fran rather less willing to do so. She would certainly make a protest when the two of them returned home.

As for the man himself, she did not actually dislike him,

though he was still a perplexing mystery. She was quite sure, though, that it was highly undesirable that he should stay long at Sky Peals, and she hoped he would leave before John returned. John hated insobriety, and if the stranger were going to get drunk every now and then . . .

By six o'clock in the evening she had begun to wonder when they would return home. By seven o'clock she had begun to wonder even *if* they would return home. The whole affair, viewed after a day's hard thought, seemed the sort of incredible episode which might end in any one of a hundred incredible ways.

About a quarter past seven there came a telephone call. She answered it and heard the calm, gruff voice which she instantly recognised. "We are at Myvern . . . just about to start for home. Expect us about a quarter to eight. Your—mother—asked me to ring you up to—to apologise for throwing dinner a little late."

"Don't mention it," she replied, a trifle acidly. "But if I were you I shouldn't try to get here by a quarter to eight. . . ." She added: "For the sake of the car," and put down the receiver with a decided snap.

4

They returned, despite her advice, only a little after the three-quarters had chimed from the garden belfry that had been one of John's most recent embellishments to the estate. Fran was in her room, and did not see them till she went down to the dining-room when the second gong sounded.

The man was certainly polite, though she was quick to notice a touch of irony in his greeting: "Good evening, Lady Savage." Perhaps she had been rather unwise to insist on her title, though it was really far more absurd for him to have begun by calling her Fran.

"I am sorry you were worried about the car," he said, as they sat down.

She had a curious feeling that she was having to defend herself. "I thought you might not be used to it," she replied.

He smiled. "I was driving a car before you were born," he remarked, casually.

"Really?" She laughed, yet felt slightly uncomfortable. "But there are some awkward corners on the Myvern Road."

"Yes. And I could feel my way round them with my eyes shut."

"You've lived round here, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"A long while ago?"

"Yes."

She felt then that something new and different was about her, that the stranger had brought with him a fresh and subtly disturbing atmosphere. Yet she liked him—and especially his smile. His smile was like a sudden blaze; it made his hair seem greyer, yet his whole face younger; it made his blue eyes quiver like windows when the light strikes them. And whenever he smiled, Nan smiled also.

Fran watched her. She sat there, nearly silent the whole of the time, with cheeks a little less pale after the day in the open air, and with eyes that followed the stranger's every movement. Sometimes she looked bewildered; at other times she looked bewitched. When he spoke she watched his lips; when he ate she watched his hands and the stoop of his head; when he laughed her shrill childish treble accompanied him a few seconds late. His talk was chiefly to Fran, but now and then, by a kindly gesture, he sought to include Nan, and whenever he did so, Fran saw a flush of keen pleasure overspread the pale, wax-like cheeks. It was as if a mere look from him brought her in some marvellous way to life.

He talked of Myvern Abbey, where they had been that day, and from that he was led to talk of other parts of the world. He had been, apparently, everywhere; he spoke of Sydney, Singapore, San Francisco, Jo'burg, Valparaiso, Constantinople—all with an easy, sparkling intimacy which somehow escaped being boastful. "But I was born," he said, in parentheses, "at a little village called Crole—a few miles from here."

"And I was born at Lima—Peru," Fran countered.

He said: "Oh, yes, I've been in Lima. In fact, I lived there for some time."

"Really?"

Fran was interested. He had been in Lima, had lived there; perhaps he would have known her parents or grandparents. . . . She was just about to ask him when Nan intervened. "I think, Peter, if you don't mind——" He rose politely, and she turned to Fran, saying: "I want to show Peter the gardens—before it's quite dark. . . ."

It was as clear as the rising moon that she wanted him alone.

5

Fran was glad when, a day later, John came back. Nan and the stranger had gone out again in the Wolseley car, and Fran drove down to Patchley Station to meet John in the two-seater.

She told him on the way back to the house all that had happened. He listened carefully, and said, when she had finished: "I think I've heard of the man. He's probably only here for a few days. Anyhow, if mother actually dares to invite an old friend to her own house, we can hardly object, can we?"

He laughed, and even when she told him about the car, he

only exclaimed: "Well, they *have* been enjoying themselves —that's very certain."

But that night, while they were all at dinner together his attitude was different. The two men met, shook hands, and passed a few conventional remarks. Then John let the other do all the talking. This was rather unusual; most often John's quiet, unforced talk dominated the table. But that night he chose to be insignificant. He smiled now and again, and said "Yes" and "Really?" like the shyest schoolgirl listener. The other, basking in the sunshine of universal attention, was at his best, and that was very good indeed. His talk of foreign lands and personal adventures had never been so enthralling. John managed to put in stray questions now and again, and perhaps they were of value in leading up to further thrilling anecdotes. Nan sat spellbound, and even John seemed more than ordinarily interested.

In the library afterwards, when Nan and the visitor had gone out, John sat silent for a few moments. Then he said, turning to Fran: "Our guest is a charming talker, don't you think?"

"There isn't much doubt of that."

"Nor of this, either—that he's a most magnificent liar."

"Liar?" she echoed, staring in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

He laughed. "Were you taken in by him? All those marvellous adventures of his—all those thrilling descriptions of travel? Mind you, I don't care—they're quite worth listening to, whether they're lies or not. . . . But, as a matter of strict truth, I shouldn't think he's ever been to half the places he mentioned. I tripped him up over one. Do you remember I asked him what he thought of the Court of Oranges at Cordova? He got quite lyrical about it, didn't he? Well,

there never was any Court of Oranges at Cordova—till I invented one."

He seemed amused, but Fran was indignant. She hated lies of any kind, and the thought that she and Nan had been the willing dupes of so many fascinating fictions made her keenly resentful. She said nothing more to John, but later on in the evening she waited in the library in case the stranger should come in alone. It happened as she had hoped; about ten o'clock he strolled in, humming a tune and smoking one of the excellent brand of cigars that John provided for guests but never smoked himself. She left her chair immediately and accosted him.

"Excuse me," she began, "but didn't you say during dinner that you had admired the Court of Oranges at Cordova?"

"I did."

"Have you ever been to Cordova?"

"I have." He folded his arms and smiled down at her. "It seems to me, Lady Savage," he added, after a pause, "that you suspect me of having told a lie."

She faced him defiantly: "I do."

"And it seems to me also that you suspect your husband—I beg pardon, *Sir* John—of having laid a trap for me. . . . Is that the usual way he treats his guests at a first meeting?"

She felt then, as she had felt before, that with uncanny cleverness he had shifted their relative positions; she was defending now instead of attacking. "I would rather you answered my question," she went on, carefully. "Have you ever been to Cordova?"

"I have, as I told you just now."

"And seen the Court of Oranges?"

"Undoubtedly."

She faced him till his smile compelled her to look away. "You're braving it out rather well," she said, "but you must

know as well as I do that there's no such place—in Cordova or anywhere else."

"Really? But, my dear Lady Savage"—he suddenly shrugged his massive shoulders and strode over to the bookshelves. "Here, let the encyclopedia settle the point. . . . Caes-Cot—yes. . . ." He searched the volume hastily "Coracle. . . . Corday . . . Charlotte . . . Cordilleras . . . ah, here we are —Cordova. . . . Now then . . ." he paused a moment and then read: "The Patio de los Naranjos lies to the east of the Puerta del Perdon, within the precincts of the Cathedral. . . . Here, come and see it for yourself. Will you take my word that Patio de los Naranjos is Spanish for Court of Oranges, or must I send for a Spanish dictionary?"

She came quickly to his side; she even suspected him of reading out an imaginary sentence. . . . He made way for her, pointing out the words on the page. There they were, undoubtedly. . . . The Patio de los Naranjos. . . .

She had the feeling, first of all, that it was only his diabolical cleverness that had ensnared her. It was not till after a moment of strained silence that it occurred to her that she had done him an injustice. "I'm really most awfully sorry," she stammered. "I—I beg your pardon. . . ."

He laughed rollickingly. "Do you feel sufficiently small?"

"I really *am* sorry," she repeated.

He sat across the arm of a chair. "Don't go away yet," he said. "I want to talk to you. I suppose you'll go straight away now to John—*Sir* John, I mean—and start defending me —telling him I'm not a liar after all. . . . Well, don't. That's what I want to tell you. I don't want to be the cause of any trouble. Just say nothing at all about me. Promise."

For a long time she did not answer.

He said again: "Promise you won't defend me to—Sir John?"

She replied, suddenly: "Promise you won't call me Lady Savage any more?"

Then they both laughed.

. . . . . .

An hour later she remarked to John: "Oh, by the way, I looked up Cordova in the encyclopedia—and the funny thing is that there *is* a Court of Oranges there."

John laughed. "That's almost a miraculous coincidence, isn't it? I'm sure I never knew there was, nor, I suspect, did our cosmopolitan friend, anyway."

6

John had opined that the visitor would stay a few days. But he was wrong. The visitor—or Peter, as they came to call him (John excepted)—stayed first weeks and then months. And the odd thing was that John did not object. To Fran his acquiescence was incomprehensible, mysterious, almost sinister; and when she questioned him, all he would say was that Peter was his mother's friend, and that if she wanted him to stay, she had a right to have him.

Fran did not dislike him personally. To do that would, indeed, have been rather difficult. He was personally so interesting, and he had, moreover, a huge and charming clumsiness; he could not sit without sprawling, or stand without seeming to tower; he loved music also, and had a rich baritone voice that was almost good enough to be first-rate.

He had no money, and Fran had the idea that Nan gave him what he wanted. "It's quite obvious," John said, "that he's not only a rolling-stone, but a bit of a sponger as well. . . . But I'd rather wait for mother to find that out for herself. And in the meantime we can manage to put up with him. He's not bad company."

So Peter stayed. Fran soon diagnosed his faults. The chief of them was a sort of amiable futility. It was not that he was altogether lazy; he was lazy one day and ferociously active the next; nor was it that he was incompetent—he could drive a car so perfectly that John once declared that he would rather have him as a chauffeur than Martin. And it was certainly not that he was weak; he had done many things in his life that no weak man could have done. It was merely that something in him—of him—suggested drift.

"Peter," she said once, when he was telling her of some stirring episode in his past, "your life's been full of adventure, yet, on the whole, I've an idea you've been unhappy. Have you?"

His answer touched her far more than a mere affirmative. "I haven't been unhappy," he said. "And I haven't been happy either. I've just been nothing—anything—from day to day. . . ."

7

It was curious, perhaps, that Peter had been at Sky Peals over a month before Fran saw what was so very, very obvious.

It was a warm August evening, and she was sitting on the terrace, reading by the light of a hand-lamp. Nan and Peter had gone for a stroll in the dusk, and John was dining in town. She herself felt rather happy, for she had lately begun to take up some of the threads of her old economic history work, and had found the effort less difficult than she had feared.

Suddenly there came a sharp stab of light amidst the blackness of the gardens. It reminded her of the fire on the mountains that she had seen years before at Innsbrück. . . . She could guess what it was—Peter lighting a cigar. She went on reading for a while. . . . But at length she put down her book with a sigh of weariness, and stood up. There were large

moths circling round the lamp shade. She leaned over the parapet, and the cool breath of the earth rose up to greet her, and the breeze also, wistful and sweet from the meadows.

The stab of light came again from the same direction. It was Peter, of course, relighting his cigar. He must have been standing in the same spot for over ten minutes.

The thought came to her, all at once . . . and then she felt herself growing hot and flushed. She told herself—Oh, they can't be doing anything so silly—they're too old—both of them. . . . But the idea, once in her mind, refused to be argued out.

Half an hour later the pair came back to the house. Peter was walking jauntily and smiling; he wore in his buttonhole a sprig of wild rose plucked evidently from the hedges in the meadows. But it was Nan who was the more noticeable. . . . There was in her face and eyes a look that Fran had never seen before; she was glowing, radiant, like a full-grown flower. And in her hand, held far too tightly, was another sprig of wild rose.

8

Fran did not discuss the matter with John. She had the idea, entirely unsupported (she knew) by any evidence, that John disliked Peter. When John disliked people he was always most strict in his fairness to them, and he was certainly treating Peter with fairness, even with generosity. Already Peter had smoked his way through three boxes of John's cigars.

Nor did she succeed in leading Nan into confession. Nan's attitude was more than ever one of frightened reticence; it was as if she were hugging to herself a delicious secret, and suspected Fran of either knowing it or wishing to know it. It was with Peter himself that Fran could have talked most easily, if only he had encouraged her. But he did not en-

courage her. He talked endlessly about his own life, but there were always two things in it that he never mentioned—how he had come to meet Nan in the beginning, and what he thought of her now.

The summer sank into autumn, and still Peter stayed. Almost every day he and Nan went out together, and almost every evening they wandered about the gardens and meadows. John said nothing; tannery business kept him late many nights of the week, and Fran wondered if he knew all that was going on, if he approved, even if he cared. Sometimes she felt sure that he knew everything, and that in this as in most other matters he had evolved some deeply-laid and mathematically exact plan of campaign which was working itself out like clockwork. And at other times she felt, with a kind of inward apprehension: Whether John knows or not, this *can't,* can't possibly go on much longer. . . .

One night there came over her the same strange feverishness that had engulfed her that night at Innsbrück years before. And this time, as then, it was beauty that swept her into the maelstrom, a swift and terrible beauty that seemed to pour into her through suddenly opened doors. Peter had sung, and his deep velvet-rich notes still lingered in the firelit room. He had sung the *Chanson Indoue,* and she had accompanied him—very badly indeed, she feared. The effort of reading the music had kept the doors tightly shut, but now, when they leaned back on the stool and Peter smiled and thanked her, they opened wide. . . . to receive something that was joy and pain together.

She shuffled haphazardly amongst the pile of music on the stand, as if indicating that he should sing again. But he shook his head and whispered: "I want to go and talk to Nan."

Nan was watching him from the fireside. She was always watching him. And now, when he turned from something

she could not share with him to something she could, her face underwent a sharp transfiguration. Fran saw it, and was first of all entranced, then almost humbled; only last of all did she understand. It seemed to her then as if beauty were blazing into the room through the windows of two souls, Nan's and her own.

The voice came from the fireside: "Don't stop singing, Peter. Fran, find some other song for Peter to sing."

But behind the words Fran could hear an unspoken prayer. Nan was *jealous.* Fran could have laughed and cried at the beautiful absurdity of it. She wanted to say: You, jealous of me, just because I can play songs for Peter, and you can't! You who *have* Peter. Why, it's *I* who ought to be jealous. . . .

Long after she had dismissed it from her thoughts, the sentence lingered in memory. And then, slowly, insidiously, it crept back into her mind, fought for her attention, shouted itself at her, obsessed her utterly in the end. . . . It was *she,* not Nan, who ought to be jealous.

She felt that something strange had come into the house, some rich warm-tinted glow that had touched even her, as a spectator, had touched her tantalizingly and had then withdrawn itself. She felt on fire with restlessness; she opened the French windows and walked out on to the terrace. The night was cold and moonless, and in the high wind the leaves kept pattering down, some touching her as she stood. Nobody followed her, or called to her from the glowing room. She was altogether alone.

9

She went to her room and literally forced herself to work. But what she did was quite valueless, and she gave in after an hour or so's effort, preferring to spend the time with a boot-

and-shoe trade journal. About ten she heard the car bringing John home, but she did not go down to meet him.

He came up a short while later. She expected nothing but his usual smile and recapitulation of the day's routine. Something would have happened at the office, or somebody would have said something, or some deal or other would have been negotiated . . . something, anyhow, with figures in it.

And yet, almost as soon as she saw John enter the room, she thought: This is the crisis—at last.

He began, immediately: "I've just had a talk with that man Smith."

"Peter?"

"*You* call him Peter. . . . I hope I've behaved with every sort of consideration, but, really, Fran, three months is rather long for an uninvited guest."

"And you told him so?"

"I did."

She felt just sad—that was all—though how or why she had no time to analyze. John seemed puzzled by her attitude, for he went on: "Are you surprised?"

"Only that you didn't tell him long before," she answered.

"I'll tell you why I didn't. I wanted to give the fellow a fair chance of going away himself. And also I wanted to give mother a fair chance of showing him that he had stayed long enough. But neither of them took the chances I offered. . . . Fran, I've tried to be fair in the matter. This house is mother's, not mine, and it's distinctly awkward to interfere with a guest of hers. But when a man of his type settles here for months and months and doesn't show the least sign of going away, then it seems to me that outside interference is—well, pardonable, at any rate."

"Yes, maybe. . . . But what do you mean by 'a man of his type' ?"

"Oh, nothing very dreadful. He's not a bad sort, or I wouldn't have had him here at all. He's amiable enough, and quite decent company. Only—he's such a waster, and wasters—get on my nerves. . . ."

She looked away. "What did he say when you told him to go?"

"He took it very quietly, as I expected. In fact, I felt rather sorry for him in a way. . . ." He added, looking at his watch: "Must go and see Hayward about the farms. It's rather late, but I promised I'd go to-night, and he knows I keep my word."

When he had gone she pondered carefully. It seemed, as nearly always, that John's attitude was fair and right, and that Peter really had been unreasonable. Yet she had grown accustomed to his company during those three months, and she could not help feeling sorry that he was going. What would he do when he left Sky Peals? More important still, what would Nan do? That she would be lonely and miserable without him seemed certain. And somehow, during those three months another quiet development had been in progress; Fran had been growing fonder of Nan than she had ever been before.

Restlessness surged over her, a restlessness that would not let her accept what John had done with her usual willing submission. Of course, he had been fair, even generous . . . and yet . . . when Peter went away, Nan would be unhappy. There seemed something final, beyond all argument, in that.

She knew she would not be able to sleep, and she wanted something to read, something that would calm her mind; but it would need to be less weighty than economic history, and less tedious than a boot-and-shoe trade journal. She thought of the day's newspapers, and remembered that they were downstairs in the library. She would fetch them.

And there, sprawled in a chair amidst the glow of a desk-lamp, she saw Peter. He was writing copiously, using (how like him!) page after page of the very best crested and emblazoned Sky Peals notepaper. He did not see her till she was was almost near enough to touch him.

"Peter!"

He looked up startled. She glanced down at the desk; his handwriting was very large, and about thirty words of it, averagely, filled a single sheet. There were perhaps a dozen sheets that he had already used. "Peter," she exclaimed, rather nervously. "I'm not going to disturb you—I only came down for the newspapers."

"Newspapers? What do you want with them?"

"You're very inquisitive, Peter. May I be inquisitive, also? To whom are you writing that enormous letter?"

He put down his pen and faced her. "The letter," he said slowly, "was to have been for you."

"For *me?* But why? And—and—in any case—why 'was to have been'? Can't I see it now?"

He gathered the sheets together into an orderly heap and placed his hand over them. "Would it be possible for you to sit here for a little while and let me talk to you?" he asked.

"Why yes, I think so. . . . But——"

"For a quarter of an hour, at least?"

She glanced at the clock. "Yes, if you like. John's gone across to Hayward's about some farm business. He won't be back till half-past eleven. . . . I'll stay here if you like, instead of reading upstairs."

"Good." He rose suddenly and walked across to the fireplace, where the fire was almost out. It was only when she saw him stooping that she realised that he was pushing his letter into the midst of the faintly glowing embers. "Peter!"

she cried out to him, but he took no notice. At first the sheets would not catch fire, so he struck a match and lit them.

"Now," he said, as the flames illumined the room in a momentary blaze. "You see why it's 'was to have been'? I'm no good at letter-writing. I'm not quite so bad at talking. But I thought I mightn't have the chance, so for safety's sake. . . ."

He came nearer to her and almost flung himself into one of the big armchairs. "I don't know whether you know," he said, with a whimsical smile, "that I've just been given notice to quit?"

"Yes, I know . . ." she said, faintly.

He added, with a meaningful lift of the eyebrows: "But not by the owner of this charming house. Oh, no. She, apparently, has no say at all in the matter. It's the occupier who counts."

"Well?"

He said, watching her: "I'm not complaining, mind. I'm only making a nasty, rude, personal remark. Don't take any notice of it. . . . I've been very comfortable here during my stay, and you've all been very nice to me. Yes, *all*. . . . And now, since I've got to go, suppose you listen quietly while I tell you one or two things about myself that I've never yet mentioned?"

He reached out a long hand to the smoker's stool that was beside the chair. "Perhaps," he said, "I may smoke one of Sir John's excellent cigars while I am talking. . . ." He helped himself from the box and after a few luxurious puffs went on: "I'm just turned fifty-five. Now don't tell me I look younger. I know I do. And I feel younger—mostly—though sometimes I feel a hundred. . . . I've had a middling hard life, and I've already told you most of the exciting bits. What I haven't told you isn't perhaps so exciting, but it's more important. It's chiefly about Nan—and me."

She gave a quiet little sigh of relief. "Yes, Peter, I've been wanting you to tell me about that."

He nodded. "I'm going to begin right at the beginning, and the beginning was over forty years ago. . . ."

And then he talked. He talked very simply and without gesture, puffing now and then at his cigar and watching the smoke ascend in spiral rings.

"Forty-three years ago I'd just finished, as I thought, my education. You can guess it wasn't much. My father and mother were village people in Crole—my father kept the post-office and my mother ran a sort of general store along with it. They couldn't afford to keep me at school after I was twelve, and the question then arose—what was to be done with me? I'd always been rather sharper than a good many youngsters, and I believe I was quite brilliant at anything that had to do with machinery. I expect in the ordinary course of things I should have drifted about from one job to another, leaving Crole and settling in some industrial part of the country.

"But the ordinary course of things didn't happen. It never has happened—with me. One afternoon as I was idling about the village a man came along wheeling one of those new-fangled bicycles that had just been invented. It was the first I had ever seen and the first Crole had ever seen, judging by the crowd that followed him. I remember him stepping outside our post-office, and asking my father if he could leave his machine there overnight—there was something wrong with it, he explained.

"Well now, a little while later I looked at that bicycle in the yard behind the shop, and I made up my mind exactly what *was* wrong with it. It needed just a tightening here, an adjustment there, and so on. So I did the job, and was just going to teach myself to ride (I always was rather unscrupu-

lous about other people's property) when my mother came out and gave me a furious scolding. . . . The next day the owner drove up in a smart little pony-cart, accompanied by a man-servant in livery. My father was handsomely paid, and he and the servant were just lifting the machine into the cart when I said (I can remember exactly the tone in which I spoke) —'Mister, you can ride it now if you want. I've mended it for you.' The man looked displeased at first, but after a while he laughed and gave me a shilling. I remember *that* all right. . . . And the next day I got a letter asking me to call on Mr. John Savage, of Sky Peals, near Patchley."

She gave a sharp start of surprise, but said nothing. He went on: "Of course I went. I stood in this very room—forty-three years ago—while John Savage questioned me. His father was there with him—an old man with an immense head and black sparkling eyes—that's the fellow—there over the mantelpiece." He pointed across the room to the portrait. "The younger man asked me if I had mended the bicycle entirely by myself, if I had ever seen one before, and a whole heap of other questions. Then at last he said 'I think he'll do,' and the old man nodded.

"They thought I would do. . . . When I think—but no, I'm going to tell you the whole story plainly, without any ideas of my own about it. . . . You want the facts, don't you? . . . Well, John Savage there and then offered me a job in his tannery in Bermondsey, and I accepted it joyfully. I went to live in lodgings near the Old Kent Road, and I worked steadily at the tannery for over ten years. I was decently paid and decently treated, but I can see now that they got their value out of me all right. Mind you, I'm not blaming them. I was an investment of theirs, I suppose. I made dozens of improvements to their machines, improvements that have saved them, I'm quite certain, scores of thousands of pounds.

Sometimes John Savage used to give me little presents—a turkey at Christmas, and once, on my twenty-first birthday, a whole five-pound note. . . I thought it was very generous of him.

"One day, when I was twenty-two, John Savage asked me to go up to Sky Peals and look at some patent turnip-cutter that had gone wrong. The place was full of new-fangled inventions like that—the Savages were always interested in anything new and modern. . . . Of course, when I went to Sky Peals, he didn't treat me as a workman. I was his guest, and he made me stay overnight from Saturday to Monday morning. He was really very kind and courteous—introduced me as 'my young friend Mr. Smith.' It didn't take me above half-an-hour to put the turnip-cutter right, and the rest of the time was just holiday. And it was then—during that week-end—that I first of all met Nan.

"She, like me, was on a visit, but I gathered it was a permanent sort of visit—her parents, she told me, had both died during her childhood, and the Savages were distant relatives. . . . Annette Denyngham—aged eighteen. . . . What's the good of trying to describe to you what she was like then?"

He paused a moment and puffed tranquilly at his cigar. "She wasn't—anything like what you might suppose—from—from knowing her now. . . . I can say that." He paused again and seemed to be meditating something. At last he burst out: "She was living, vital, then. . . . Do you know what I mean? And she fell in love with me instantly, just as I did with her. We *were* happy. . . . But it wanted the devil of a lot of managing, I can tell you. She wasn't allowed very much freedom, and I, of course, worked every night at the tannery until half-past six. But I bought one of those safety bicycles that were all the rage just then, and I used to leave Bermondsey at half-past six, have a hurried tea and wash, and get to

Sky Peals by about nine. There's riding for you—nearly thirty miles in two hours. People used to think I was practising for track-racing. . . . There was many a night I had my ride for nothing—it rained, or else she couldn't manage to get free. But other times . . . we used to meet in the meadows and stay there, hidden by the darkness and the long grasses. Sometimes John Savage passed by only a few yards away from us, for in those days there was no way up to the house except through the meadows."

"I remember that," she whispered faintly.

He went on, heedless: "How long do you think this charming idyll lasted? Long enough, at any rate, for us both to make up our minds that life without each other wouldn't be life at all." He smiled gently. "And then John Savage found out the whole business. Somebody at the tannery told him that I cycled to Patchley a good deal, and he just waited in the meadows one night and found us.

"He behaved very fairly. He didn't blame me, except for the secrecy of it. He said that Nan had a perfect right to choose the man she wanted, and that if she chose me it would be perfectly agreeable to himself and to his father. But she was far too young. I can hear him saying now—'After all—*eighteen*—dammit, man!'—And I had to agree. He seemed so fair and reasonable about it. But Nan just stood there and cried—and cried. . . .

"It was his fairness that won me round. He told me he was just as anxious as I was to make Nan happy. Only, of course, before he could consider me as a suitor, she must be older—at least three years older. Then he said he had a scheme. I was to go right away—abroad—on a decent job he would find for me—for the three years, and if at the end of that time Nan still wanted me I could come back and marry her. It all seemed so fair, and generous, even—and I really didn't want

to break with the Savage family. So I agreed. The job was in South America, and I left for it in less than a fortnight's time. But Nan didn't want me to go. *She* didn't think it was fair."

He leaned back and continued reflectively: "Women *are* like that. When they want something, they go hard at it. But men stop and think—about friends and family and honour and the future. Just as I did. . . . Well, anyhow, I went to South America. The job was a good one—I was mining engineer to a Peruvian exploration company. By the way, I ought to have mentioned that one of John Savage's conditions was that Nan and I shouldn't correspond except by a conventional Christmas greeting every year. (She'd extracted that small concession at the last minute.) It was September when I went out, and at Christmas I sent and received the first message. Then a year's silence and then the second Christmas. Again I sent and received the message. I was earning good money and saving most of it, but I wasn't allowed to tell her that. You see I kept *my* word. . . . Then another year of hard work, and then the third Christmas and the last, thank God. . . . But nothing came. After a month's waiting I felt justified in writing her a letter, merely telling her that I hadn't received the permitted greeting. I got an answer to that letter, but it wasn't from Nan. It was from John Savage himself—a charming letter—oh, *most* charming. Just told me that Nan had changed her mind and wanted to marry somebody else, and that both he and she hoped it would not be too much of a blow to me. . . . Really a friendly letter, if you like."

"And what did you do?"

He looked up sharply, as if surprised for the moment that there was anyone else in the room. "Do?" he echoed. "I'll tell you what I did. First of all, I got drunk for a week. Then I threw up my job—I'd had enough of those damned mines—

and I went over the mountains into a decent climate. Then I went down to the coast towns and rotted about—yes, just *rotted.* Once, as I was roaming about the slums of Callao, I saved a man from being half-murdered by a gang, and he turned out to be a wealthy Peruvian—called himself half-Spanish, of course, as they all do. He found me a job on his ranches, and after a few years he also found me a wife—his own daughter, a pretty little woman whom I never loved quite so much as I ought to have done. I was quite happy with her, though, as one generally is with somebody one likes but doesn't love *too* passionately. We had one child—a little girl, and I was getting plenty of money, and really, what more could anybody want? . . . And then one day in Guayaquil I met an Englishman in the tanning business, and of course I asked him if he knew John Savage. Oh yes, he knew John Savage—had stayed at his place in the country—knew him very well. Told me that the old Mr. Savage was dead, and that 'young' Mr. Savage had been married for two years to a most charming girl twelve years his junior. She'd been his father's ward, and when she turned twenty-one she'd come into a large fortune. Business, you see, as well as romance. . . . The fellow also told me that they'd a child—whom they'd christened John—the very image of his father.

"When you're comfortably married, with a child of your own, that sort of news isn't so very much of a shock at the time. You go home to your wife and family thinking, 'Well now, fancy that!' and you probably forget all about it in a day or two. But it's afterwards—maybe years afterwards—that you remember. It flies at you perhaps in the middle of some night when you can't sleep, and then you find that during the interval it's grown—grown monstrous—strong enough to throttle you. . . . Just now, for instance, there are three voices that boom in my ears as if they were yelling at me con-

stantly. One is John Savage saying when he found Nan and me together in the meadows—'After all, *eighteen,* dammit, man!'—And another is Nan herself crying to me on the last time she was allowed to see me before she went off—'Peter, it isn't fair—you oughtn't to leave me at all!' And the third is that cheerful English chap on a boiling hot day amidst the filth and smells of Guayaquil—his 'Oh, yes, a most charming girl—a dozen years younger than he is, and an heiress as well —he's been damned lucky. She's one of the Denynghams of Northumberland—know the family?'

"But, as I said, it didn't seem to affect me so much at the time. My own child was growing up, and my work extended, and then—things happened to me again. My wife and child and I, along with my father-in-law—really a most cultured man, one of the old grandee type—were going down the coast from Guayaquil. There was a storm and the ship was wrecked. Wife and child went into one of the small boats, but the seas were so heavy I never expected to see either of them again. I waited with the old man in the saloon—waited to drown, as I thought. And the strange thing was, that during those moments I could think of nothing but Nan and Sky Peals and the meadows where she and I . . . It was just as if the interval between had all been washed away. I told my father-in-law that if by any chance he should be left alone with my child he was to take her to a friend of mine in England who would look after her while she was young and give her a good English education. I had plenty of money to pay for it, of course. I wrote down the address on a piece of a cigarette packet—I wrote 'Mrs. Savage, Sky Peals, Patchley, England.' He took it, and then in the scuffle for the few remaining boats, we got separated.

"When you come to think of it, that was an extraordinary thing for me to do. How did I know that Nan and her hus-

band would wish, or even agree, to have anything at all to do with my child? On the face of it, it seemed quite possible that they wouldn't. And yet—somehow—I felt certain—certain—that it would be all right. And the certainties you feel when you reckon yourself about a couple of minutes off death aren't exactly things to be argued against.

"As it happened, all the four of us were rescued in the end. But my wife died from pneumonia in Callao, and I got a knock on the head that sent me silly for a while. I was taken ashore on a wild part of the coast where nobody knew me; I'd lost my memory, and there was nothing to connect me with the disaster to the Guayaquil boat. There'd been a good many small wrecks in the storm, and I suppose, from my build and general appearance, they thought I was a seafaring man. . . . Meanwhile, all along the Pacific coast Peter Smith was reported among the missing. . . . After a few weeks my memory came back to me very gradually, and then I heard the news of my wife's death. I learnt also that my father-in-law had just set sail for England with my child.

"Now what ought I to have done then? I suppose I could have followed him across the ocean (there was no wireless in those days), but the chances were I shouldn't overtake him till he reached Patchley. A meeting at Sky Peals with Nan and John Savage didn't appeal to me, and besides, to take the child away again as soon as Nan had seen her, didn't seem to me *possible*. . . . Oh, I *couldn't* have done it. . . . And, apart from all that, there was something else—a sort of feeling I had—that what I had done was—somehow—*right*. It was *right* that I should die and bequeath my child to Nan. It was perfectly—mystically—right, if you know what I mean. Something seemed to urge on me—If *you* can't go to Nan, you had better send her your child. . . .

"So I just allowed myself to die. There was property of

mine in Lima worth thousands of pounds, but I didn't care—I knew it would go to my child. And besides, the thought of freedom wasn't unattractive to me—I felt it would be rather adventurous to cut adrift again. I'd been very fond of my wife and I couldn't bear the thought of living in the Lima house all alone. . . . Everything made it easy—almost inevitable—that I should do what I did—my own desires as well as the workings of blind chance. . . . So I just called myself by another name and began another life." He paused and added, with a heavy sigh: "And the rest of my adventures, have they not been recorded in the many strange tales I have from time to time related for your amusement?"

He had finished. His whole body suddenly relaxed its tension; he sank back into the chair as if a great burden had been lifted from him. And amidst the silence that followed he chose another cigar and lit it.

She said, in a faint, uncertain whisper: "Of course, I know . . . now. . . ."

"Did you never guess?" he interrupted quickly.

She half-smiled. "I guessed all sorts of things—when you kept on stopping here, and nobody seemed to have the courage to turn you out." She laughed sharply. "Oh yes, I guessed, but the guess seemed so—so fantastic."

"The truth is fantastic," he answered, sombrely.

Then the dark silence fell on them again. She was deeply, incredibly moved; she wanted to say so many things to him; the silence all about them seemed so full of urges and desires. He was her father. . . . Strange that the revelation meant so much, meant so much that was, for the moment, beyond words. . . . Her father. . . . She *had* guessed it, amongst scores of other guesses, but to know was so much more than to guess. . . . She felt that she wanted to be kind to him, to show him that the revelation mattered to her; she would have kissed him,

if—if she had been braver. . . . As it was, she felt her eyes brimming over with tears, and a queer sort of muscular paralysis in her limbs; if she had moved or spoken she would have collapsed.

"Do you mind?" he said, after a pause.

"Mind?" she echoed, bewilderedly. "Mind what?"

He answered: "Mind my being—to you—what I am."

The tears brimmed over and fell down her cheeks. She shook her head violently and could only stammer: "No . . . I don't mind. . . . I'm . . . I'm . . . *glad*. . . ."

"Good," he remarked, gruffly. And he added: "*I* was glad, too—the minute I saw you."

Silence again. She wondered if John were on his way back. She wondered if John would be surprised when she told him. Would *he* be glad, as she and Peter were? And Nan? Nan, especially. How complicated it was all going to be. . . . "What made you come here, Peter?" she said suddenly, as the thought came to her.

He smiled. "That's altogether another story. I was in 'Frisco about nine months ago, and I chanced to meet a fellow who knew this district pretty well. Naturally I asked him the same old question—did he know the Savages, of Patchley—tanning people. . . . He said: 'Oh yes, I know Savage. He's still following in the family footsteps—selling boots.' I said, thinking I'd shift the conversation round to Nan—'He married one of the Northumberland Denynghams, didn't he?' For a moment or so the fellow looked at me rather puzzled—then he replied: 'Oh, you mean the *father*. He's been dead fifteen years or more—was killed in an accident at the tannery.'—I knew then that Nan was alone."

She asked, abstractedly, as if the matter hardly concerned herself: "It was Nan always, wasn't it, Peter? I don't think you were very keen to see your—child."

He looked then exactly as he had looked that morning when she saw him first—an old man tired and weary. "You were young," he answered, "and Nan, I knew, would be getting old. I also was getting old. And old people think of each other, just as young people do. Besides—in a sort of way—I never wanted to have you so much as I had wanted Nan to have you. Do you understand? You ought to have been hers—hers and mine—from the beginning. But as you were mine alone, I wanted to make you hers in the end. . . . Tell me now, what has it been like with her? Have you been good friends? Have you been fond of each other?"

She might have answered him with easy soothing affirmatives, but something stronger possessed her, some simple urge to tell him the truth just as she felt it. She said slowly, thinking it out as she went along: "Peter—will you believe it?—I've hardly known Nan—at all? She had never very much to do with me—or with Micky when he was here—she was always kind, of course, but she didn't seem interested in us—or in *anything*, very much. And then—when we grew older—it was John—all John." A faint undertone of indignation was in her voice. "John ruled her, Peter, John managed everything for her—and managed it very well—and she—she worshipped him—she—she almost *wallowed* in worship of him." She added, more tranquilly: "Until *you* came. She's been different since then. She's seemed to—to come alive. . . . And I've been growing very fond of her—it's the first real chance I've ever had."

The room was getting chilly, and she shivered, yet not so much with the cold as with the sudden calm of having told him the utmost truth. After all, it *was* true—that Nan, when she and Micky were children, had been just—nothing. And then, when she looked across to Peter, she almost wondered how it could have been so; for Nan was so lovely in his eyes.

She felt again the flood of beauty drenching her; it was in his eyes, seeking, struggling; she cried out—"Oh, Peter, Peter—I *will* be kind to her—*now*. . . ."

He answered, with deep pity: "I know you will. . . . But she was right, poor child,—it *wasn't* fair—I ought never to have left her—never at all."

10

It was nearly half-past eleven, and John might come home at any time now. She had so much to say to John, and she did not want him to see her and Peter together.

"Why didn't you tell me all this earlier—soon after you came here?" she asked him, just before she went away.

"Because," he replied, "I thought it would be rather better fun to get to know you first. And it has been, hasn't it?"

He gave her then that blazing unforgettable smile that had made her like him in the beginning. "Goodnight, Peter. . . ." she said, softly. "And we'll help Nan—both of us."

11

Of course Peter would not have to go away now. That was the first and obvious deduction from what had happened. The ultimate and deeper results of his revelation were as yet unfathomable, but this much was certain, John could not object to his remaining at Sky Peals now that the truth was known.

She felt almost dazed by the sudden shifting of her own position. She had thought of Peter as—*this,* and now she had to think of him as—*that* . . . her own father. She was not sorry. She was just faintly, rather timidly glad. But chiefly she was anxious to get hold of this new situation with both hands and straighten it out.

Of course she would tell John everything immediately. He would have to alter his plans, no doubt, but that was inevitable. Anyhow, she would *insist* on his altering his plans; she would not let Peter be turned out of Sky Peals now that she *knew*.

The curious thing was that when John came home that night she did not tell him at all. She was going to, was almost on the point of so doing, when she had one strange and solemn moment of fear. It was towards midnight in her room; she had let him tell her all about his business with Hayward, and was waiting patiently for the opportunity of conveying her own much more important news. And then all at once the thought darted across her mind: *Does he know already?*

It was an awful question, because it was so impossible to answer. She could not tell from John's face what he knew. He might be totally ignorant, or, on the other hand, he might have planned some elaborate strategy based upon a complete and thorough knowledge of every detail. She felt suddenly scared, not of him personally, but of the secrets that might be in his mind.

She had again the impression, more clearly than ever, that he disliked Peter. Last of all that night he said to her: "Your friend Smith was in the library rather late this evening. I saw the light as I came through. . . . I asked him why he didn't go to bed, and he said he didn't feel sleepy. He seemed rather —worried. . . . So I told him I'd give him a week to find somewhere else to go to. After all, perhaps that's the fairest thing. I've no desire to be hard on the fellow."

Her fears echoed his words till they swam about her mind with secret, inner meaning. . . . He had no desire to be hard on the fellow. . . . Some part of her urged: Tell him, tell him now, don't let another moment go by without his knowing the truth. . . . She opened her mouth to tell him, but

she could not speak. And before she could try again he had bidden her goodnight and had left her.

12

The next morning Nan complained of a headache and stayed in bed all day. That was a pity, for Fran had been looking forward to a long talk with her about Peter. She would tell Nan that Peter had told her everything, and Nan, after the first moment of fear, would be glad. They would be better friends than ever, now that they could both talk about Peter. . . .

That was how it was to have been. But Nan's headache made everything different. Or something did. Fran was bewildered, disappointed; the vitality seemed to have vanished, and the old waxen listlessness come back again. There was no gleam of encouragement in the dull, empty eyes and the sadly beautiful face.

Peter waited impatiently in the library for Fran to bring him news. "You've told her!" he cried, eagerly as she entered the room. "You've told her that you know! Oh, isn't it fearful luck that she's ill to-day. . . ."

"Yes." She sank wearily into a chair. "But I'm afraid I haven't told her, Peter."

"Not told her?"

"No . . . I—I couldn't. . . . She didn't look—as if—as if she'd be—interested. She's just as she used to be . . . perhaps it's only because she's not well. . . . Oh, go up and see her yourself if you'd like to."

He was gone over an hour and then came back with strained face and sunken eyes. "You're right," he said, sharply. He was silent for several moments. Then he suddenly banged the table with his fist. "Fran . . . Somebody's been—been *getting at* her—tampering with her. . . . Do you know what I mean?

She's not the same—and—and I can't make her the same. She was even—angry—with me— for coming up to see her! Good God—*angry*—with *me!* Now . . . Who is it? WHO IS IT? I feel—I feel—" He stretched his arms and braced his huge shoulders defiantly. "I feel as if I were—in battle—against—a—a secret and invisible enemy. . . . Where is it? What is it? Who's on my side? Who's against me? Is it *you?*"

She answered very softly: "Peter, you know it isn't I."

"Then is it John?"

She did not answer him at all then, but her eyes gave him a look which he seemed to read easily. "If it is . . ." he cried, and then checked himself and became calm. "I'm sorry . . . he's your man, and I'm not going to make trouble. *You* mustn't take sides at all. If there's a fight, I want you out of it—completely out of it. See?"

"Why are you thinking of a fight, Peter?"

"I don't know. . . . I wish I did. That's the worrying—the absolutely fiendish part about it. I've fought with my hands before now, and I've fought with my brains, but I've an idea now I'll have to fight with my soul. . . . But I'm blind—I can't see my enemy. And yet—in a way—I feel—I feel this whole house is against me—the very bricks and mortar of it. I had that same feeling years ago when I used to lie in the meadows watching and waiting for Nan to come out to me . . . I used to feel—'I'll have to fight that house first—before I can get Nan!' . . . Oh, leave me a while now, and let me grow calm again. . . ."

She left him sadly and went back to Nan.

13

The next day Nan got up, but seemed no different. It was not she who watched Peter now, but he who watched her; he

followed her with burning, anguished eyes that Fran could not bear to see. In the afternoon she went into Patchley on business, and when she returned, about tea-time, she found the house apparently empty. Manning, roused from his fastness, gave her news that Nan and Peter had gone out together, that there had been a small scene in the garage, where Martin, acting apparently under John's orders, had declined to let them have any of the cars; that Peter had thereupon rung up a local garage and hired a taxi, and that the two had driven off in it after a fruitless attempt by Peter to persuade the driver to leave his car in their hands.

"Did Mrs. Savage seem better?" Fran asked; and Manning replied:

"She looked very quiet, my lady, and very sad."

What would happen? What *could* happen? She tired herself with wondering. One thing was axiomatic; John must be told soon. If he did not know already, she must tell him herself, must tell him exactly who Peter had been and was. For John could not but change his attitude to Peter when he knew.

She made up her mind to tell John that evening. If Peter and Nan did not return for dinner she would be alone with him then, and that would give her a suitable opportunity. She decided even the small details of how she should tell him. She would begin, very simply and straightforwardly: "John, I want to tell you something rather important about Peter. He's not what we thought him to be—just a total stranger with no claim on us at all. He's really very closely connected both with the family and also—especially with me. In fact, he's my father." Would John be surprised? Certainly not, if he knew already. Probably not, if he didn't know already. He was so rarely surprised at anything. But if he told her he had known all along, then she would ask him the plain ques-

tion: "Why didn't you tell me as soon as you knew? Was it fair to keep such a thing secret from me?"

Towards evening a heavy blustering rain began to fall; John came home considerably late, owing to a burst tyre on the road. His hands and sleeves were muddied; he had been helping Martin. Things like that she liked in him especially; he was completely unsnobbish. . . . But she could see from the first glance at him that Martin had been telling him all about Nan and Peter.

For the first time in her life she saw him really angry. She knew he was angry, though his outward manner was no different from usual. As soon as the servants had retired and she was looking for her chance to tell him about Peter, he began to talk about Peter himself.

"The fellow's getting past all endurance," he said, biting off his words. "I had a talk to mother about him recently, and I'm pleased to say she understood my point of view very well. Of course, it was difficult for me to approach her on the subject—since the man's her friend, and since also this house belongs to her. . . . But still, she quite agreed with me that he's stayed here long enough."

"She did that?"

"She did." His voice grew harder and sharper as he went on: "And but for her I'd turn him out tonight after the disgraceful scene he made in the garages this afternoon. Went storming at Martin because I'd given orders that the cars weren't to be lent. If he'd run off with one when Martin wasn't looking I'd have thought more of him. . . . But I call it the mark of the low-bred cad to blame servants for doing what they've been ordered to do."

Before she could make up her mind how, in these rather altered circumstances, she should tell him her news, he rose hurriedly from the table and said that he had an immediate

appointment with Hayward. He was negotiating for more farms.

14

When he had gone, she went into the library; rain was still heavily falling, and she expected Peter and Nan to return at any time. It was curious, she reflected, that John had made no comment on their being away together. He had, of course, preferred to seize unerringly on the one point in which Peter had been indisputably wrong—the scene with Martin. She wished that Peter had not given him such a chance.

In the firelight the room seemed full of ghosts. The portrait of John Savage, grandfather of the present John Savage, glowered from above the mantelpiece; it was he, as Manning could remember, who had opposed the building of a road up to the house. His gleaming eyes and big dome-like forehead gave an impression of dominating personality and imperious will. The Savage temperament, in its fiercest, crudest form. . . . Yet if the temperament had been hereditary, the looks certainly hadn't. His son had been a step down from that summit of grim and relentless implacability. There was a photograph of him in Nan's room; it showed him in his late twenties, a tall, handsome, lithe-limbed young man with a small, black moustache and dark, extremely beautiful eyes. Yet perhaps there was in them, half-concealed behind their beauty, the authentic gleam. . . . And then John—Sir John —*her* John. He was another step down. He was not particularly tall, or particularly handsome, or lithe-limbed at all, and there was hardly a gleam in his eyes. Yet there was the gleam somewhere—hidden—the Savage temperament burrowing deeper into the soul.

It was after ten when there came a knock at the door. She called "Come in," and Peter entered.

His clothes were soaked, and the rain dripped off his sleeves as he stood. But he was smiling. He was smiling as even he had never smiled before, and his eyes—she still could not endure to look at them, for their joy was as poignant as their misery had been. She exclaimed: "Peter, where *have* you been —to get so wet?" and he answered:

"Oh, we thought we'd walk back through the meadows—it wasn't raining so much just then."

She waited for him to continue. She knew he had something to tell her. Something immense, vital. He suddenly seized her hand in his and clasped it till it hurt. "Fran . . . I want you to do something for me. I want you to go up and talk to Nan. She's in her room now. We've just settled everything. We're going to be married next week—earlier if it can be arranged . . . and we're going to be very happy—both of us—at last. . . ."

"Peter!"

She could not utter more than that single word. He cried out: "Are you sorry? Do you mind, Fran?"

She shook her head quiveringly. Then she dragged her hand out of his and left him, murmuring as well as she could: "I'll go and see her now. . . ."

15

How beautiful everything was, on this night of wild wind and rain. . . . She raced up the stairs with a wonder tugging at her heart, a wonder that all the knots of the problem could have been so instantly, magically unloosed. Peter to marry Nan. . . . Of course . . . of course . . .

She found Nan changing out of wet clothes into dry ones. Nan stood still when she entered, and gave her a glance half-joyful, half-frightened. They neither of them spoke at first.

Something welled up behind Fran's eyes and brought tears to them—it was beauty again, the beauty of Nan's joy and Nan's fear. Nan was lovely, delicate, exquisite. She was as lovely as a young girl. Her figure, with her damp clothes clinging tightly to every curve of it,—her eyes, her flushed, rain-streaked face, her bare, wet shoulders—all were young, young as her joy. You would not have thought she was nearly fifty. You would not have thought she was forty. There was nothing so fragrant, so rose-like, in the whole world. And Fran rushed forward to her, half speaking, half sobbing—"Oh, Nan, darling—you're lovely—you're lovely——"

They clung to each other like young girls at the first confession of love. Then, long afterwards, Nan said: "So he's told you, Fran?"

"Yes."

"And you're not—sorry?"

"I'm—I'm glad."

"I never guessed you would be such a friend to me, Fran."

"And I never guessed it, either."

Then they laughed. Then they began to talk. It was chiefly Nan who talked. "It's all so strange—I can hardly believe it's true." She kept saying that. "I've hardly grasped it—if I really understood it all I think I should go mad with joy. . . . Four months ago, Fran, I believed he was dead. . . . And then one afternoon when both you and John were away he just walked in through the gardens as if he belonged here. . . . And he does—he *does* belong here now. . . . I gave him some whisky to calm him, but it didn't calm him—it made him drunk. . . . Oh, you should just have seen Manning trying to get him into bed . . . Manning couldn't lift him an inch." . . . She laughed hysterically. "But, Fran, I shall be so happy with him. And yet it's only an accident after all. I never meant to give in to him like this. John, of course, doesn't know who

Peter is—that's why he thinks he oughtn't to have stayed here so long. And I—I promised John I'd be cool to Peter, just to show him he'd stayed long enough!" She laughed again, helplessly, incredulously, and then turned to Fran with childlike pleading in her voice. "But how *could* I be cool to him, Fran? I tried to,—for a while, just to please John, but it made me ill, and then when Peter begged me, prayed me to go out with him . . . I said I wouldn't at first, but he looked desperate—I was almost afraid of what he might do. He was wild, Fran—wild—and when he couldn't get any of the cars he swore at Martin like a maniac. . . . Even when we were in the taxi together I didn't mean to give in to him. We went to Myvern, and all the way he was begging me. Then it rained, and on the way back we went through the meadows—where he and I—years ago . . . I gave in there. I couldn't help it. Oh, Fran, do you blame me for wanting to marry Peter? Are we too old? *I* don't feel old, and nor does Peter. But *are* we? Do you think we're making a mistake?"

"No," Fran replied. "You made your mistake years ago." She put her arm suddenly round Nan's waist. "Oh, Nan, I don't want to be cruel—but why did you—why did you marry somebody else after you had promised Peter?"

Nan looked like a child about to cry. "I daresay you think *you* wouldn't have done," she almost whimpered. "But you might—you don't know—you don't know how you can be made to do things you really don't want to do at all. . . . I don't really know why I married John. I don't think I even knew why at that time. I suppose it was because John was very good to me, and I grew fond of him—in a sort of way—but not as I had been fond of Peter. It all happened so suddenly. I was left some money, and I knew John needed money for the tannery just then—he simply lived for the business, just as John does now. I offered to lend or give him some of

my money, but he wouldn't take it . . . and then, somehow, we got engaged. But he was very fair. He asked me, before I said 'yes' to him, if I was quite sure I didn't want to wait till Peter came back."

"And you said you were quite sure?"

"Yes, I did . . . I did . . . but I've paid for it since. . . . Oh, Fran—don't look at me—I don't know why I did . . . I think it was chiefly because I wanted John to have the money for the tannery—he was so worried about it just then——"

"The tannery!"

"Yes, yes. . . ." She caught hold of Fran's hands and buried her face in them. "Fran, I oughtn't to have done it—I know I oughtn't. But it's done now, and what's the good of looking back? Besides, is it too late now—to do what I ought to have done? Oh, don't—don't tell me it's too late to marry Peter! Fran, I can't do without him now—I couldn't live without him—I tried and it made me ill. . . . Oh, it isn't—it *can't* be quite too late, can it?"

"*I* don't think it's too late."

"You *don't!*" She gasped for joy. "*You* don't!" She cried, passionately: "And *I* don't! And Peter doesn't! Then who else is there?" Her face clouded. "There's John. Will *he* mind? Do you think he'll mind? Oh, Fran, talk to him for me—tell him how much I want Peter. John's always been very kind and good to me, ever since he was a child—and he's always so—so *fair*—in everythnig. I don't see how he *can* mind. He'll like Peter when he knows who he is. Fran, you will—you *must* help me with John—you'll tell him that I'm not—as old—now—as—as I have been——"

She broke down then, and sobbed till Fran, huskily promising, calmed her. "Don't worry, Nan," she whispered. "*I'll* talk to John. . . . Don't worry."

16

To Peter, waiting with steaming clothes in front of the library fire, she said: "She wants me to talk to John about it, Peter."

He seemed to be in the throes of a reaction after his earlier ecstasy. "I don't want you to take sides at all," he said, almost peevishly.

"I'm going to, any way. You said that when a woman wants anything she just goes hard for it. Well, Nan wants *you*. And *I* want her to have you."

His eyes kindled at that. "So you mean to talk to John about it?"

"Yes. He's got a reputation for being fair—even to people he doesn't like."

"Such as me." He added: "Don't talk to me about John's fairness. I know the Savage fairness. It's the most damnable thing in the world." Then he smiled his sudden, winsome smile. "Don't mind me. . . . I'm raving with happiness inside, no matter what I'm saying. And at the present moment I really do feel rather like a wet blanket—literally."

She looked down at his steaming clothes. "Have a hot bath and go to bed, Peter," she said, laughing. "Because as soon as John comes in I want to talk to him. . . ."

17

She would have to tell John now. The interview, being inevitable, appalled her less; and besides, she had promised Nan. Whenever she thought of Nan her mind became clear and her will renewed; it was for Nan's happiness, more even than for Peter's, that she was battling. She went up to her room and threw open the window to meet the chill night air. Over the

meadows a moon was rising like a rim of delicate shell; the rain had stopped, and the earth smelt of a delicious coolness.

John came up between eleven and twelve, well satisfied with his evening's work. "I've got the Manor and the Whaleback," he said, referring to two farms that he had been after. "Seven thousand guineas for the pair of 'em. Stiffer price than I expected, but Hayward says they're worth it. You must come with me to-morrow and inspect them."

"Yes," she said. She let him talk on. He told her the acreage of each of the farms, the number of horses, cattle, tractors, carts, and so on. "There are fifteen labourers' cottages which I shall rebuild in the spring. I shall try to sell the Manor farm-house—it's near the road and quite a comfortable place. The Whaleback's no good at all—it had better come down immediately." His mind was already occupied with it, planning everything down to the smallest detail.

After he had discussed his intentions she said very firmly: "John, I want to talk to you—now—about Peter."

"All right. Fire away."

He was in a good humour, she could see. "I want to tell you," she went on, "if you don't know already, who Peter really is."

He kept his eyes fixed on her steadily as he replied:

"Perhaps I can guess and save you the trouble. He's a man with whom mother had some slight relationship when she was very young, and who went abroad and married somebody else."

"Yes. And he had a child."

"I can guess the rest as well. That child is you."

"Yes."

He walked over to the window and stared out. After a long silence he turned and faced her again. "Well," he said, quite calmly. "In what way do you suppose it alters the situation?"

She answered simply: "He is my father. I don't know yet—exactly—what that means, but—but it means—something."

After a pause she went on: "You guessed who he was—so you say. Why didn't you tell me? What right had you to keep such a thing secret from me?"

"Why didn't *he* tell you?" came his answer, promptly. "What right had *he* to keep such a thing secret from you?"

She was momentarily nonplussed, and he continued with increasing confidence: "I'll tell you why he didn't tell you. . . . Because he's clever. Exceedingly clever. He knew well enough that if he came up to you suddenly and claimed to be your father, you'd be rather scared. . . . Instead of that, he got to know you gradually, got you to like him first of all as a friend. Now that was really smart of him, so smart that I had to go one smarter and pretend that I hadn't a ghost of an idea who he was. I wanted to find out just what his little game was before I took any action."

Out of all that he had said she selected a single phrase. "'His game,'" she echoed. "Why do you suppose he has any game? Isn't it natural that he should want to see me—and Nan—after all these years?"

"Perfectly natural. As natural as that he should sponge here for three months, smoke stacks of my best cigars, and commandeer my cars as if the place belonged to him. Perhaps he thought it might, sometime."

"I'm sure he never thought anything of the kind," she retorted, with sharply rising indignation. "You don't understand him, John—you don't understand him a little bit. There's only one thing in the world he wants—and that's Nan."

"Exactly. There's only one thing in the world he wants, and that's the thing that would give him everything else."

She flared up then; she cried, with a passion too keen to be

anything but calm: "John, that's simply not true. He wants nothing but Nan—herself alone. And, whatever you or anybody else says, he means to have her. They've arranged it together, both of them, and they're to be married almost immediately—in a few days. . . ."

She saw then the gleam that she had never seen before, the gleam that was in the eyes of old John Savage downstairs above the library mantelpiece.

In a voice rigorously controlled he answered her.

"Fran, I don't wish to discuss this any more to-night. It all wants thinking over—seriously and carefully. . . . Good-night now, and thank you for telling me this—this—" he fumbled for an adjective—"this really sensational news."

She knew she had badly bungled the interview. She had intended to plead with him, to put Nan's case before him, to outline, if she could, the pathos of Nan's life without Peter. But he had given her no chance. He had faced her as she had once seen him face a deputation of tannery workmen, ready with every simple, fluent explanation, and equally ready to pounce like a tiger when the weak spot showed itself.

She was not surprised that he had guessed the secret of Peter and herself. But she was sorry, because otherwise she would have had a chance to tell him Peter's life-story, with all its burden of weariness and futility. She had planned it all—had even chosen some of the phrases she would use. And then to have it all smashed irremediably by John's brisk—"Perhaps I can guess and save you the trouble." It was a disappointment she had more than half expected.

18

Sunday was the next day. Sundays at Sky Peals were not especially different from other days, except that John was at

home. He usually made an extensive tour of the farms, and that morning, amidst golden autumn sunshine, he took Fran to see the Manor and the Whaleback. Most of the way he discussed crops, and it was only as they were crossing the fields on the return journey that he said: "Now, with regard to mother and this man. . . ."

"Yes?"

He gripped her gently—persuasively—by the arm; his old, and in some ways, his most intimate gesture. "I have been thinking it over, Fran, very carefully. Above all, I mean to be fair."

She walked along with him in silence; he was evidently waiting for her to say something, but she did not know what to say. The word "fair" had reminded her of what Peter had said about the Savage "fairness."

"Fairness," he continued, as if divining that she was pondering over the word, "is chiefly seeing things from somebody else's point of view. That's just what I've been trying to do. And from mother's point of view it does seem rather hard to have to do without this man if she really wants him."

"I'm glad you realize that."

"I *do* realize it," he answered. He proceeded, rather like a lecturer in some abstruse science—"On the other hand, there are several important points to be considered. Is this man—for example—suitable? Is he good enough for her?"

She was about to answer when he went on, hastily: "I know what you are going to say. You are going to say that it is for mother to judge of that. And I quite agree with you."

"But there's another matter. The family—the firm—and all that it implies. We *must* think of that. It's no light matter to welcome a stranger into a—I had almost said—into an *institution*—like ours. We've got our traditions. Personally, I'm

as proud of the first Savage who opened a cobbler's shop in Fleet Street three years after the Great Fire as other families are of their so-called Norman blood. . . . We *have* something to be proud of, though we don't talk or make a fuss about it. . . . All that, mind, oughtn't to count if mother makes up her mind that it shan't count. It's entirely a matter for her to decide. You'll admit, I'm sure, the fairness of that?"

She nodded slowly, almost reluctantly.

"There are other details, of course," he went on. "One is the matter of this house. It belongs to mother. We live here by permission from her. If she marries we shall have that permission no longer—I shan't allow her to give it to us. It wouldn't be fair. If, when she marries, Sky Peals must belong entirely to herself and her husband. We must find a place elsewhere.

"Then there's the money question. The firm's doing quite well, and I don't suppose any of us would starve. But at present, you see, there's no exact allocation. What I mean is that the profits are all, strictly speaking, mother's. She's the chief shareholder and the real owner of the tannery, factories, shops, and so on. The profits come to her, and up to now she has generously put them in my hands to spend as I have thought fit—to keep this place going, buy farms, and so on. The money she has for her own personal use is very little. It's just as much as she wants, of course, but it doesn't amount to more than a very few hundreds a year.

"Now if she marries, all that can't go on. She will—she *must* draw, without deductions of any kind, the whole of the money that's rightly due to her. What she does with it will no longer be our affair, though we can hope that Sky Peals will be decently looked after. And as for me personally, I shall arrange to take a salary from the firm in return for my

work there. Perhaps six or eight hundred a year would be reasonable."

She was obviously surprised and discomfited by all these unforeseen matters. "Are you sure, John—?" she began, and he retorted, without waiting for her to finish:

"I am quite sure that there is no virtue in being fair by halves."

She shrugged her shoulders as if trying to shake off a burden. "The main thing is," she said, fixing her eyes straight ahead, "that Nan is to marry Peter. And you have decided to agree to it."

He answered: "I have told you, and I shall tell mother, that she must do exactly what she prefers."

19

Out of John's presence Fran could hardly believe that the future had been made suddenly clear for Nan and Peter. She had reckoned for so long with John's determined opposition that to find it removed all at once, dazed her, especially when she further reflected on all that John had said the marriage would entail. She had never thought of such a thing as having to leave Sky Peals. It had never occurred to her that such a thing would be feasible even, much less obligatory. But in the end John convinced her that it was so, and that the admission of Peter into the family, if it were to be done at all, must be done without stint.

She admired John's attitude over this. She knew what it would cost him to leave Sky Peals; she knew the hours of ungrudging effort he had put into it, the love he had for every field and farm of it, and the extent to which he personally was responsible for its efficiency; he had nursed it, almost, from a mere ten-acre patch surrounding the house up to its

present area of several square miles. It still seemed, even after he had persuaded her otherwise, rather superfluous for him to give it up. As an act of symbolical welcome to Peter it might be commended, but it seemed hardly fair to John himself.

The curious thing was that she could not interest Peter in these matters at all. His attitude surprised her, even antagonized her at times, by its fierce and uncompromising hostility to John. "I don't care how much he gives us or how little," he kept saying to her. "I want Nan, that's all."

"You're rather unfair to him, I think," she sometimes remonstrated. "After all, Peter, he's treating you very generously now—at last."

"He may be. But he needn't expect me to be grateful to him for giving me things I haven't asked for and don't want. I want to marry Nan, and it seems to me that it's Nan's business and not John's at all."

Nan's attitude was different. She was like a winsome, lighthearted child; at first she realized nothing, thought of nothing, except the simple fact that she was to marry Peter without John's opposition. In the height of her rapture she took hardly any notice at all of anybody except Peter himself. It was Peter who made the wedding arrangements—fixing it for a date about a week ahead. The affair was to be quiet, just as Fran's had been, and it was agreed that Fran and John would remain at Sky Peals for a few weeks afterwards until they could make other arrangements. During those few weeks Nan and Peter would be abroad; Peter had selected Brittany for the honeymoon.

Only after days of ecstasy did Nan appear to realize that the marriage would involve some re-shuffling of the household. One afternoon she said to Fran, rather bewilderedly:

"Why must you and John live somewhere else after Peter and I are married?"

"John thinks we ought to," Fran answered.

"I can't see why, Fran. Peter and I aren't keen on living here. And I'm sure neither of us would want to live here if it meant shifting you out. Fran, I wish there could be some other arrangement. It's tremendously generous of John, I know—but really, it wouldn't make me a bit happy . . . happier," she corrected. "Now why couldn't . . . ?"

And she outlined a plan which showed, at any rate, that she had been thinking over the matter. "John's just bought the Manor Farm," she said, "and he wants to sell the old farm-house. It's really quite a comfortable place to live in—I've had tea in it scores of times when I was a little girl . . . and it's only a couple of miles away. Now why couldn't I buy it and live in it with Peter? Why not? I'm sure I've enough money—John would see to all that."

"Buy it?" Fran exclaimed with a laugh. "Why, it's yours already."

"Mine?" Oh no, it's John's."

"John's?" She laughed again. "Why, Nan, nothing's John's, really. It all belongs to you. The tannery, the house, the factories, the farms—they're all yours. If you want to live in the Manor farm-house it's yours to live in. You'd better talk to John about it."

20

Days passed. They passed rather irritatingly; Fran felt she would be thoroughly glad when the whole business was over and settled. Strangely, perhaps, it was Peter who was causing most of the irritation; his treatment of John was being extremely churlish. Once Fran said: "It seems to me, Peter, that

you don't altogether deserve the happiness you're going to have."

His answer, sharp and brutal, was: "Wait till I have it."

"But—Peter—of *course* you're going to have it."

"Wait, I say."

He suddenly flung himself down on the library settee and pushed his hands wildly through his hair. "Fran," he cried, restlessly, "you think I'm being disgustingly unfair to John. don't you? I *know* you do. But—I can't help it. I've a sort of feeling I can stand him better as an enemy than as a friend. He's all right when he's fighting you, but when he comes loaded with gifts . . . Oh, never mind me—I'm irritable—my nerves are all on edge. I feel—somehow—unsafe—insecure."

"You mean that you don't trust John?"

He seemed to be struggling with his inmost feelings in a fruitless attempt to cram them into words. "It's not only *him* I don't trust. . . . It's this . . . this. . . ." He flung his arms toward the ceiling. "Oh, it's all everywhere—this house, this estate, this farm . . . Not only this, but everything that belongs here—the farms all round about, the tannery miles away, the factories and warehouses and shops, God knows where. . . . They're all against me—I can *feel* them against me. I feel as if every Savage boot in the world would walk over my grave before it would let me marry Nan."

21

It was Nan, more than Peter, whom Fran saw during those days of waiting. And even on Nan, as time progressed, there fell a certain mood of perplexity; she had asked John about the Manor farm-house, and the idea had evidently met with

his strong disapproval. Sky Peals, he had said, belonged to her, and he would not consent to her living anywhere else.

"And yet I'm sure I shan't know what to do," she confessed to Fran, "without John to manage everything for me."

"Perhaps Peter will do it just as well."

"But the farms, Fran . . . I suppose John will still look after them?"

"I daresay. There'll be Hayward, anyhow."

"Oh, but *John* must do it. Fran, Peter and I don't *want* all this—we don't want it at all. And what would John do without the farms? He'd be miserable. . . . And then—what will *you* do? Where will you and John live?"

"We can manage our own *affairs,* Nan. Whatever John does, you may be sure he has good reason for it. You look after Peter and let Peter look after you."

"Yes, but the farms—I can't help thinking about them. John's just bought some more. . . . Peter doesn't want to look after them, and neither do I."

"Then let Hayward manage them. Let *anybody* manage them." A wave of sharp irritation swept over her, the kind of irritation that makes a child stamp its feet and yell at the top of its voice. "Let the farms go to the devil rather than miss the chance you've got . . . with Peter." She felt the irritation move down her throat, making her cough; she cried out, almost in despair: "Oh, Nan, I wish it were to-morrow you were marrying him!"

Then quickly, as if the tempest had flown from one to the other, Nan began to cry. "You're frightening me—you're making me wonder what will happen. . . . Fran, why did you say that? Tell me! Does Peter think it's too late?"

"I don't think so. It was the earliest date that could be arranged."

"No, no—I don't mean that. I mean. . . . Oh, Fran is it

all too late? *Is* it? When I'm with Peter I feel young, but when I'm with you and John I feel old—old—as old—as if I hadn't the right to be alive. Fran, thirty years ago they thought I was too young to marry him. Do they think I'm too old now? Do they? Do you know if they do? Does John?"

"Nan, darling, John's never said——"

"No, no, he's never said. But he thinks—he *thinks*. . . ." Her sobbing broke itself into a cascade of hollow laughter. "I've seen him look at Peter and me when we've been together. I've seen him watching us. . . . And I know what he thinks. . . . He thinks we're old fools . . . old fools. . . ."

"Nan"—she seized her roughly by the shoulders and forced her to break the rhythm of her misery. "Nan, you don't know what you're saying! Nan—as if John thinks of you like that! As if he *could!*"

A sudden calmness came over both of them. Nan said quietly: "John has always been very good to me. John's just like his father—fair and generous always. He's being fair and generous to Peter, isn't he?"

"Yes. And when you and Peter are married you can pay him back by being generous to him."

She answered deliberately: "I wouldn't trust Peter to be generous to John—ever. He hates him."

A shadow fell at that moment across the floor, and they turned and saw that it was John standing in the doorway. He looked worried (he who so rarely worried) ; his face was rather pale, and his eyes stared heavily as if he had had sleepless nights.

"May I come in, mother?" he said.

"Of course, John."

He said, smiling faintly: "Sorry I couldn't help overhearing that last remark of yours. What a pity it is that Peter hates me. . . . Anyhow, mother, will you ask him if he can spare

an hour or so this evening? Just a few small details of business I want to discuss with him, that's all."

He thanked her when she agreed, and then, with a final nod to Fran and a glance at his watch, hurried away downstairs.

22

She heard all about the interview—from Peter. "Nothing but a lecture on scientific farming," he told her. "All about rotation of crops, and model houses for the men, and Ford tractors, and electric light in the cowsheds . . . the principles of the successful business man turned agriculturist. Oh, it was all very interesting. Do you know what it reminded me of? Of the day forty years ago when his father and grandfather talked to me in this same room about the firm. I was younger then, and I was more impressed."

He went on: "When John had finished the farming lecture I just said: 'Thank you for your interesting advice. With it and with my own ten years' experience of farming I should manage rather well. . . .' He ought to have looked crushed. But he didn't. You'd never make John look crushed."

"You're bitter, Peter," she said.

She was altogether disappointed with him; so far from being joyous and zestful as she felt he ought to be, he was moody and indolent, a curious contrast to the Peter whom she had grown to like merely as a friend.

23

On the day before the wedding-day she drove herself to Myvern in the two-seater car. She wanted to be alone, and to leave Peter and Nan to themselves; in some ways the atmosphere of Sky Peals had lately been getting on her nerves. But

Myvern was restful, soothing. The weather was mild for the end of October, and with the warm air and the sunlight she would have spent a perfectly happy day but for an undercurrent of uneasiness which even away from Sky Peals she could not altogether escape. It was an uneasiness that attacked the very roots of all her thoughts; it made her feel certain of nothing, and doubtful of everything. . . . Was Peter really good enough for Nan? It was, as John had said, a pity that Peter hated him so intensely. Peter's hatred was so perverse and unreasonable. John, after all, was acting very generously—even, some might think, too generously. When she thought of Peter living at Sky Peals and owning and managing the estate, and of John living in some small house in the suburbs (probably) she felt sorry for John and rather exasperated with Peter. Though, of course, it was not entirely *his* fault.

As she drove round the countryside and noted the contrast between the picturesque decay of the farms near Myvern and the bustling, prosperous newness of everything that John had taken over, she could not forbear a certain pride in the new which almost outweighed regret for the old. Pilcher's Farm, near the spot where she and Michael had smashed up the old Delage car years before, was now one of John's acquisitions. She could hardly recognize the scene of the accident. The ditch had been piped, and instead of the old straggling hedges there was now no more than a line of concrete posts, connected by strands of wire. John had bought it at so much a mile. . . . Its very ugliness seemed to shout to her that the farms ought to belong to John and not to anyone else.

She had tea at Crole, where Peter had lived as a boy. But in Crole John's hand was visible everywhere; there were the rows of trim red-bricked cottages that he had built, and the High Street widened by his gift of land, and the Savage Cottage Hospital perched up on the hill overlooking the village,

and a neat, discreet advertisment of the Savage boot on a hoarding outside the railway station. . . . Well, anyhow, John would still have the firm. But how absurd for him to be satisfied with a few hundreds a year! Why couldn't he continue to share the profits? True, no doubt, that Nan was the real owner of everything, but it was John's work and John's genius that had made the firm what it was; Nan had had nothing to do with that. It was monstrous that John should forego what was so obviously his due.

Sharply, as she was driving home through the fast-gathering twilight, the problem of Nan and Peter and John seemed to crystallize into a single simple issue. If Peter really wanted Nan and Nan only, why on earth didn't he refuse outright the position that John was trying to force on him? After all, you couldn't be forced to accept thousands a year and hundreds of acres if you didn't want to have them—if you *really* didn't want to have them—if all you really wanted in the world was a certain woman to be your wife. . . .

About half-past six she reached the house, entering through the conservatories. Manning was in the dining room, superintending the laying of dinner; he could not tell her whether Peter and Nan were in the house or not. "But Mr. Smith," he said, "has been in the library nearly all day."

The library door was half open as she passed down the hall. She gave a quick glance into the room; it seemed to her quite empty. She went on, reaching the foot of the staircase before something drew her back. Some sound it was, faint and impossible to classify—some sound that might be coming from the library.

Then she looked in again and saw Peter.

24

She cried out "Peter!" and rushed towards him.

For he was sobbing like a madman. His huge body lay sprawled across one of the settees, and the only light to see him by was the moonlight, for the fire had gone out. But the moonlight showed her his face, showed her every line and curve of it writhing.

"Peter, Peter!" she cried, touching him. "*What* has happened? Peter, tell me—what *has* happened, Peter?"

When he saw her he grew instantly calm, as if ashamed that she should see him in his self-abandonment. "Fran . . ." he whispered huskily. He took her hand in his and pressed it to his face; his face was burning and warm with tears. "Fran . . . don't—don't put on any of the lights."

"No, no," she answered, less calm now that he was himself. "But—Peter—what is the matter? Tell me. . . ."

He sat up erect, throwing back his huge shoulders as if to meet the worst. "The matter is this. . . . Nan and I aren't going—to be married . . . after all."

"You? Nan? You mean? But why—Peter, why on earth—what *has* happened?"

He half-smiled at her.

"Nothing has happened—really. Nothing at all. . . . Only that—an hour ago—I asked Nan . . ." he almost broke down then. "I asked her—an hour ago—if—if she really wanted to—to carry on—with our arrangement . . . and she said . . ." he fought over again the rising tide of misery. "She just didn't say anything. . . . She just looked at me, and I knew—she didn't want to."

"But, Peter——"

"I've told you it all. There isn't any more. She doesn't want me—she doesn't want me now. . . ." His voice swelled

into terror. "I shall get over it—don't worry about me. . . . But—but why—why—*why* doesn't she want me? Because—because of John. He said she could do what she wanted, but he made her *want* what *he* wanted . . . that's the trick. . . . See? Good God—the Savage fairness—there it is for you! Look at it carefully! It's hellishly fair, isn't it? It's—it's——" He was screaming now, with arms outstretched and fingers hooked as if clawing to death some dreadful and invisible foe.

"Peter—stop shouting. Peter . . . I'll go and see Nan. I'll go and see her now. Where is she?"

"Oh, you needn't see her. There's nothing to see. There's just her empty body with no heart in it, no life, no soul. . . . John's killed her soul. It was only sleeping when I came here, but it's dead now. Don't go and see her. She'll frighten you—just as she frightened me just now. She'll tell you that it's too late—that she's old—and, by God, she *is* old now, what's left of her . . . what's left of her after this—this *Savagery*. . . ."

Even amidst the bitterness of his grief he could wrench a morsel of satisfaction from a word.

"Peter, I'm going up to see her, anyway."

She left him crying: "I knew it would never happen. I knew—somehow—it couldn't. I could feel the very bricks of this house fighting against me—inch by inch—and winning. . . . And Nan could feel them too. . . ."

25

But Nan was quiet, like a tired, sad child. She had been crying, but when Fran reached her she was too tired to cry any more. The utmost limit of her grief seemed to be a slow, pouting exasperation.

"Peter," Fran began, but the look on Nan's face stopped her. What *was* this change that had come over her? Then Peter's burning words came into memory and stayed there, echoing: "An empty body, with no heart in it, no life, no soul. . . ."

There was no argument. Nan would not argue. Even when she talked, her words were a plaintive, half-melancholy gossip against Fran's eager passion; there was no heart in her, no life, no soul. She felt ill, she said; she was going to go to bed.

"But Peter——"

"Fran—don't—*don't* talk to me about Peter."

"Why not?"

"Because——"

"Nan—if you could see Peter now——" She stopped; she could not plead passionately or eloquently; Nan's eyes drove the words away. All she could say was a harsh, gasping "*What's* the change that's come over you? *What's* the matter? *What's* happened to you? Are you *really* ill? You're *different*——"

"I don't know. Don't worry me."

26

An hour later, when Nan was in bed, she went down to the library. What *could* she say to Peter? She felt afraid to meet him, to tell him that what he had said about Nan had been so terribly true. . . . But Peter was not there. And Manning, whom she questioned, said that he had been gone since seven o'clock, and had not said where he was going or when he would return.

She went upstairs to Nan's room again. Nan was sleeping —apparently. "Peter's gone," Fran whispered quietly, but the closed eyelids did not flinch.

About eight o'clock there came a knock on the door, and

only then did Nan move. She opened her eyes, and into them came a look as of pleasure after joylessness, interest after boredom, relief after pain. "It's John," she whispered, and called to him to enter.

When he stood by the bedside he looked pale and haggard, as if he had lately been overburdened with worry. . . . But he smiled when Nan smiled.

It was their smiles, linking them so utterly, that sent a stab of pain through Fran. Did John guess—*could* he guess—what had happened? She cried out, half angrily: "John"—and then she remembered Peter's fierce words: "He said she could do what she wanted, but he made her *want* what *he* wanted. . . . That's the trick. . . ." Was it the trick? Was it what had happened? Was there no limit to the power of John? . . . She cried out to him, half-angrily: 'She's ill, or she says so, anyway . . . and she's decided she isn't going to marry Peter after all . . . changed her mind at the last . . . and Peter's not in the house—he *knows,* of course—perhaps he'll come back—I don't know—I don't know. . . ."

He stood perfectly still, facing them both. *Was* he surprised? Had he expected it? Was it all according to some deep plan of his? He turned at last to Nan and said quietly: "Is this true, mother?"

She did not answer him, but her smile continued.

"Are you ill, mother" he asked again, more softly.

She answered, in a crooning voice, as if soothing herself with the mere sound of it: "It's all true, John." She took his hand and pressed it gently to her breast. "Forgive me, my—my dear John—but I couldn't—when I thought about you—and how—this place—and all that's been ours for so long—and the firm—the firm . . . Oh, it didn't seem fair—it didn't seem somehow—*real.* . . ." She gazed up at him with eyes that suddenly burned. "John—John—*dear* John—I'm far

happier with you—*here*—and helping you—than I ever would be—even—with *him*. . . . I don't want him—so much—as I want *you*. . . ."

"Mother!"

He did then what Fran could never have dreamed of him doing. He knelt down on the floor beside Nan and put his head against her arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

PETER AND MICHAEL

1

Once again she felt that her soul was in rebellion against John. She wanted passionately to do things, to take command of the situation herself, to find Peter and bring him back to Nan. She saw, as in a calm retrospect, the whole folly of what had happened. Nan's marriage to Peter need not have involved the least domestic upheaval; Nan could have gone to live at the Manor House, and John need not have surrendered anything. All the issues had been false and distorted. . . . If only she could bring Peter back again, could make the problem as simple as it ought to have been in the beginning. . . .

But Peter had gone. He could not be traced. One of the under-gardeners had seen him walking through the meadows, but beyond that, he might have disappeared off the earth. Fran was not only eager to find him, but worried about his disappearance; she knew he had no money, and she knew also that his mood was desperate.

She wanted to be angry with John, but she could not. He was so utterly reasonable. He told her very quietly: "We both of us agreed that the whole business was a matter for mother to decide. If she had decided *for* this man, I would have ac-

cepted the situation. Now that she's decided the other way, it seems to me that you ought to do the accepting."

He confessed quite frankly that he was glad that Nan had made her last-minute recantation. "I've thought it over more carefully, perhaps, than I've ever thought over anything, and I'm convinced that mother has done well. . . . The man *hated* me. *You* know he did. I tried my best, during the days when I thought the marriage was inevitable, to get to know him, to make him feel that, whatever my private views, I would loyally accept him as one of the family. All I got was surliness. . . . Fran, that man, as my mother's husband, would have been able to do us all infinite harm—and probably *would* have done, just to try to injure me. And mother, who, even under his influence, would always have thought of us, would have been just—torn in two. . . . He would have dominated her——"

"You know that," she intervened.

He smiled. "I know I do. I admit it. Mother's not strong enough on her own. She likes to be dominated—in the way *I* dominate. Domination by me means safety and calmness and happiness."

Impossible to argue against him. Impossible not to admit that a good deal of what he said was the truth. Yet . . . but the "yet" was vague, unfathomable, too strange to put into thought, much less into words.

2

Peace lay over Sky Peals now. Even the roaring of autumn winds could not disturb the new and passionless tranquillity. Everything worked like well-oiled clockwork; food was again served at regular and fixed hours (Peter and Nan had been woeful disorganizers of meal-times); the routine of farm and

garden labour went on with steady precision; workmen attacked the old Whaleback farm-house and razed it to the ground. And the Manor House, where (so it seemed to Fran) Peter and Nan might have lived so happily, was sold to a stockbroker who brought his family there for weekends.

Nan was ill, but not very ill. She was ill enough to stay in bed when she wanted and get up when she wanted. She was just ill enough for Myles to come every day and remark that she was getting along nicely, and for John to ask, as soon as he reached home every evening (but without anxiety): "How's mother been to-day?"

And John himself . . . he was just the same. Perhaps he treated Nan with just a shade more kindliness and deference. Perhaps, altogether, he was more thoughtful, more considerate. To see him strolling over the ploughed fields on a Sunday morning was to see him at his happiest, and to see him at Nan's bedside, letting her fidget pleasantly about his clothes and his health, was to see him at his kindliest.

Fran alone, after the sudden climax and anti-climax, found it impossible to settle down. Yet, in one way, when she dared to confess it to herself, the resumption of the old easy routine was a relief to her. She would have hated to leave Sky Peals. . . . But life at Sky Peals was merely physical ease; the comfort of it did not touch the mind. More and more, as autumn turned to winter, she suffered attacks of blinding depression, in which nothing was arguable or analyzable, but in which everything seemed lost behind the clouds of a universal melancholy. She did not feel angry with John; she admitted that he had had good reasons for all that he had done. Nor did she feel much pity for Nan; for Nan, in her own way, was quite happy. With Peter, curiously enough, she felt the only touch of anger that was in her at all; she felt that if he had not hated John, Nan might not have been afraid to marry him.

. . . But chiefly for them all she felt what was neither sorrow nor anger, nor yet indifference; but a struggling, occasionally perturbed interest, as of the awakened dreamer for the half-forgotten people of his dream.

She had a strange idea, amounting almost to a conviction, that she would see Peter again. And when, one dark afternoon in December, the maid told her that a man had called and wished to see her, but would not give his name, she thought of Peter immediately. (The maid was a new one, and would not know him.) "You'd better ask him in here," she told her, and during the long seconds of waiting, her mind was running swift riot. What should she say to him? What *could* she say to him? Should she let him see Nan? Dare she tell him that Nan was quite happy, in her own old way, without him? Had she the power——?

But the problem did not arise. The man was not Peter. He was—like the sudden end of the world—*Michael*. . . .

"Hullo, Fran. . . ."

"Micky. . . ." She rushed up to him and stared. She was half-afraid to touch the hand he offered her. "But . . . Micky. . . *You*—really, *you*—of all people!" She stepped away from him and leaned against a chair She felt faint. Her voice was almost angry as she went on: "Why didn't you—'phone—or wire—on your way here? You've almost—killed me—with surprise. . . ."

"Sorry, Fran. But I thought if I let you know beforehand I might find the whole place barred and bolted up."

"Oh, but how could you—how *could* you think that?"

Then they stared at each other without speaking. She was dazed from the suddenness of the encounter, and her quickened heartbeat seemed to stop her brain from working. Only very gradually did she notice the more obvious things about

him—that he was looking very fit (though hardly four years older), and that he was unusually well-dressed.

"Besides," he went on, "I didn't know exactly when I'd be coming till a few hours ago."

His voice, now that she was in a condition to notice it, had a slight and not unpleasant American accent.

"Do sit down . . ." she urged, still aware that she did not possess perfect control of herself. "Sit down and talk to me."

He accepted her invitation with that sudden dazzling smile that revealed to her immediately why it was that she had liked Peter's so well.

"I guess it's nice for you to be so nice to me," he said whimsically.

Even yet she was obsessed with his appearance. "You *are* looking well, Micky."

"Yes, *I* am. But *you're* not."

"After a shock like this, how can you expect it?"

"Maybe I ought to have 'phoned you," he admitted. "But you'd have been just as scared over the 'phone—perhaps more so. After all, it's a shock you'd got to have—somehow and sometime. . . . I say, how's John?"

His abrupt question hastened her conquest of herself.

"He's quite well," she answered, rather vaguely, and then he continued:

"Of course I heard of your marriage. It was in the papers, you know. . . . 'Boot King Weds Secretary'—that's how they put it over there. . . . Guess I ought to give you my best congratulations—only a few years late."

"Of course you'll stay to dinner and see John, won't you?"

"See John? Rather. I wouldn't miss him for worlds."

He laughed, and his laugh, unchanged after the years, completed him in her mind.

It was only as a kind of after-thought that he added: "And Nan? Is *she* all right?"

"She's a little ill sometimes. But she went to town with John this morning. She'll be back for dinner."

3

Tea was brought in, and by that time he was deep in his talk. It was chiefly a story of wandering. He hadn't stayed long on the Queensland ranch (the work was too hard for him); after drifting down to the cities he had been for a while unemployed, save for odd jobs. . . . "I've been a waiter, a bar-tender, a reporter on a paper where the editor couldn't spell, and a pianist at a fifth-rate cinema.". . . Then he had crossed to New Zealand on a tramp steamer, and had gradually worked his way *via* the South Seas and Honolulu to California. "It was in California I had a stroke of luck. I got a job as a pianist to a small concert-party going the rounds of the Arizona mining-fields. Twenty dollars a week and a percentage of the takings. But I wanted to cross to New York so I saved up most of it, and after a few months I'd got about two hundred dollars.

"Maybe you think I'm looking pretty prosperous? Well, it all began out of that two hundred dollars. I guess there's not many fellows in the world have made any money *my* way. Anyhow, I'll just tell you how it happened. One morning a fellow came up to me and pitched a yarn about oil deposits in Oklahoma. Regular down-and-out sort of chap he was—took me into a shady corner of the street and told me he'd got square miles of land down there, but he wanted cash to get to Seattle to see his dying wife—offered to sell me all the lot for five hundred dollars cash down. A real chance for me—might make me a millionaire inside a year or so. . . . And if

I hadn't got five hundred, well, what *had* I got? . . . Somehow the chap seemed to hypnotize me, and before I knew where I was, he'd got my two hundred dollars and I'd got a lovely-looking sort of deed printed in three colours and looking like a Band of Hope certificate. . . . Oh, you should just have been there when I told the rest of the boys what I'd done. They laughed at me till I laughed at myself—though losing two hundred dollars isn't exactly a joke.

"I daresay you're thinking me rather a fool, eh?" (She wasn't; she was just wondering, as she always did on meeting him after a long absence, whether she really liked him or not.) "Of course it *was* an old trick, and I ought to have known better. Well, just listen now—I'm coming to the real cream of the joke. After the season was over I thought I'd like to push east and see what it was I'd really bought. I didn't expect to rescue a single cent, let alone make a fortune—it was just curiosity that drove me. Of course, I found the land all right when I got to Oklahoma. There always *is* a bit of land—worthless land—that they sell you—that's how they manage to keep inside the law."

He went on after a pause: "Now what do you think happened then? Simply the one beautiful chance in a million. . . . Somebody had been prospecting, and my bit of land really *had* got oil under it—oceans of oil! Whether the chap who sold it me really *was* a swindler or not, I don't know to this day. Anyhow, I had scores of offers for purchase, and I let a smart fellow sell it for me on a ten per cent commission. He got me fifty thousand dollars. Fifty thousand!" He whistled softly. "I can hardly believe it even now. Anyhow, the money's mine all right. And I didn't stay long in Oklahoma, I can tell you. I went straight on to New York and then to England."

"You've just arrived, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. I got here two months ago—about October."

"Two months ago?" A curious expression came into her face. She said quietly: "You haven't been very eager to see us, have you?"

She expected he would reply: "Well, you weren't very eager to keep me, four years ago." It seemed the obvious and unanswerable retort. But he did not make it; it did not seem to occur to him. He said, surprisingly: "Oh, but I *did* come here—or rather I nearly came here—two months ago about—just after I'd landed. Only—I—I changed my mind . . ."

She looked perplexed, and he went on: "That's rather another story, if you want to hear it. But it's not so thrilling as the first one, I warn you."

"It can't help being interesting," she answered, "if it explains why you changed your mind about coming here."

"I'd just bought a small car," he said, "and I drove up in it from town and left it in the lane not far from the lodge. It was a moonlight night, and I thought I'd walk up to the house through the meadows. I'd just got about half-way when —when I met somebody."

"Yes?"

"He was an oldish sort of fellow—very big—and—and I thought he was drunk at first, because he was staggering about and mumbling things. As a matter of fact, he *was* drunk, but more than that—he was ill, upset—about something or other. He didn't tell me what it was, and I don't know now.

"I asked him a few questions, but he wouldn't—or couldn't —answer them. But I didn't like to think of him rolling about the meadows all night, and perhaps getting arrested for trespass, so I thought I'd put him along the road or do something with him. I helped him along to my car and drove him about a bit, and that seemed to clear his head—he began to talk to me quite sensibly. He'd been abroad a good deal, and knew

many of the places I knew, so we found enough to talk about. And—it seems a queer thing to say, but it's true—I—I liked him—quite suddenly. I can't tell you how or why, but I did. . . . We went back to town together, and I took him to dinner and tried to cheer him up a little. I didn't tell him who I was, and he didn't tell me who he was—and, after all, what did it matter?"

"Meanwhile, of course, you forgot all about *us?*"

"Oh, no, not at all—only I knew that you'd always be at Sky Peals for me to visit, whereas Matthews—he told me that wasn't his real name, but it would do. . . . Well, anyhow, we went about together, and I got to like him more and more. You *must* meet him soon—I'm sure *you'd* like him. Of course, he's got no money but then that doesn't matter now, since *I* have. . . ."

She had guessed—right from that first phrase—"an oldish sort of fellow—very big"—that the man was Peter. Yet, anxious as she was to learn what had happened to him, Michael's extraordinary story came to her chiefly as a revelation of himself. It was all so like him—so like the eager, casual way he let himself drift through life. It was like him to be swindled by an American land-shark; even to make a fortune out of it ultimately was a caprice of fate that accorded well with his own caprices. Most of all, perhaps, it was like him to set out to go somewhere, to meet somebody on the way, and to go somewhere else instead. . . .

Amidst her disappointment that a mere stranger could have so easily lured him away from a first meeting with her after four years, she could not but feel also a queer, half-pleasurable pang of recognition. Whatever had happened to him, he was still *Micky*. . . .

4

He went on talking in the same care-free, desultory way until nearly dinner-time. He hardly gave her a chance to say anything; he had so many stories of his own to tell, so many adventures to describe. Towards seven o'clock he seemed to realize that he had been talking nearly continuously for over three hours. "I say," he cried abruptly, "I haven't let you tell me anything, have I? How *are* you— *really?*"

"Altogether well, Micky."

"But haven't you heaps to tell *me*—about—about everything?"

"I don't know that I have. You don't want me to tell you how the firm's getting on, do you? Anyhow, even if you do, I'd better not, for you'll hear it all over again when John comes." She glanced at the clock. "And he ought to be here any minute now."

"It'll be fun to see old John again," he said, smiling. "I guess when I tell him I've made a fortune he'll open his eyes pretty wide."

She looked at him then, and saw that he was wholly the same, his eyes the same clear, eager brown, his hair the same shimmering, untidy confusion. And she knew also that *she* was the same, and that she *did* like him.

5

But it was not easy to make John open his eyes pretty wide. And the meeting was therefore curious; for John, who had not been prepared for it, was far calmer than Michael, who had been. But neither of them was quite as calm as Nan, who so tired after the journey from town, seemed hardly more sur-

prised to see her own son after four years' absence than any casual stranger who might have called.

The evening, though, passed in an atmosphere of cordiality. John, always a good listener, was perfectly ready to let Michael talk, and Michael, always a good talker, became, under the influence of champagne, brilliant, vivacious, even uproarious. His account of how he had made his fortune amused John intensely. "You've really had the most amazing luck, Michael," he said, at the finish of the story. He went on, with typical practicality, to analyze and compute. "I gather there's fifty thousand dollars standing to your credit. That's about twelve thousand pounds. Not at all a bad little sum. It'll bring you in six hundred a year, and with careful nursing I daresay you could bring it up to twenty thousand. . . ."

Michael's eyes suddenly flashed. "D'you know, John," he cried, with a certain impish gaiety, "I've often wondered what word should be applied to your treatment of money? And now you've just given it me yourself. . . . You 'nurse' it. . . . Better than nursing babies, perhaps, eh?" His eyes gleamed like stars; he had drunk, if anything, too much. "By the way," he added sharply, "you don't seem to have any babies either. Have you?"

He looked at Fran, and she felt herself flushing hotly. She wondered if John would be angry and make a scene; she hoped not. For the question, though embarrassing, was just the sort of thing Michael *would* ask. Even his peculiar brand of tactlessness she recognized with a half-poignant joy.

But John was not ruffled. "Some day," he remarked, calmly, "when there are no ladies present, you may ask me all the questions that are considered quite good taste in an Arizona mining-camp. But for the time being——"

"Good old John!" Michael cried heartily. "Same old crushing rebuke! Same old masterly sarcasm! Same old everything

—we've none of us changed a scrap, have we? And the old beautiful sense of fairness, too! That's still the same, isn't it? D'you know what a friend of mine once said to me? He said, 'There's one thing about the Savages—they're fair—fair as hell!' I guess that's some testimonial, eh?"

"You had better not drink any more," said John, without any emotion of any kind.

6

In the library, after dinner, John asked Michael what he intended to do with his money. "If you put it into my hands," he said, "I could invest it for you to bring in, say, six—or even perhaps seven—per cent. I assume you don't intend to touch the capital."

"Touch it?" echoed Michael wildly. "*Touch* it? D'you think I'd be satisfied with a *touch?* Why, I'm going to *splash* in it—*wade* through it. Don't think I'm going to be a twelve-pound-a-week nursemaid all my life!"

John looked quietly reproachful, as he always did in the presence of financial heresy. It was, perhaps, the only way to shock him—to talk of money in a flippant manner. "Well, what *are* you going to do with it?" he asked, after a troubled pause.

Michael's voice took on the treble eagerness of a child explaining the details of a game. "I'm going to do *good* with it," he declared, with a laugh. "*Good,* my lad—that's what I'm going to do. I often used to think that if ever I had any spare cash I'd show you how to use it. Well, now's my chance. What's the good of putting money into a firm and just drawing dividends? You can't say that helps anybody but yourself. Well, helping myself doesn't happen to be the chief aim of my life. My motto isn't five per cent."

"I hope not," replied John, supremely at his ease now that there was prospect of an argument. "And neither is mine. Last month, for example, I spent two thousand pounds in equipping the tannery with baths, so that the men who do unpleasant work can clean themselves before going home. I assure you the baths won't yield me five per cent."

Michael laughed. "Won't they? I guess they will, indirectly, or you wouldn't spend the money on them. It's all very well to look after the men's bodies—that helps you, because it's the men's bodies that do the work you give them—but what about their minds—their souls? Would you spend two thousand on them?"

"Certainly I would, if I knew how. As I don't know how, I spend the money on making them clean, which is something, at any rate."

"Don't forget that the dirty Sicilian peasant is happier than the clean English artisan."

"Yes, because he's ignorant. If he wasn't ignorant he wouldn't be either dirty or happy. But that doesn't mean that dirt and happiness are the same. Your logic is at fault, Michael."

"*Damn* logic. I'm talking of *real* things. Logic's only a word. . . . Why is your Sicilian peasant happy? I'll tell you. It's because his whole life is full of colour. Colour—that's the secret of it. Whereas your Bermondsey workman——"

"Gets as much colour as he wants, you take my word for it. I know him better than you do."

"But you *don't!* You never *could!* Wait till I've got my plans in something like working order. I'll show you things, then. . . . I'm going to *pump* colour into some of those slums. The demand's there latent. . . . And what's more, in the long run, it may even pay five per cent.——"

"*Five?* My dear fellow, if you're going to run a philan-

thropic institution you oughtn't to be satisfied with *five*. Fifty is more usual. In fact, I know a church in Tunbridge Wells that would pay, if it were on a business foundation, at least eighty. . . . But this—this is what I want to get at—what exactly *is* this idea of yours? How's it going to be run?"

But Michael could not explain—except very vaguely. He wanted to do good. He didn't care if he lost every penny of his money, though all the same he didn't see why he should lose it, if he could only stimulate this latent desire for art, life and colour. He would run concerts, clubs, art classes—preferably in the very worst slum districts. The one thing for which people were starving, if they only knew it, was for the full use of their five senses. . . . "Have you ever been to a doctor and had your ears syringed? I have—I'd gone just a bit deaf out in California. Only a bit—not really enough to trouble me . . . but when the doctor had done the job, it was just as if the whole world became suddenly full of sound. . . . Well, that's what would happen to most people if, by a sort of miracle, they could get themselves syringed entirely. The world would become alive for them—full of sights and sounds and colours and sensations of all kinds. Now Art is the Syringe. Without it, all the senses are either clogged up or gross . . . but with it . . . with it. . . ." He waved his hands to express the unspeakable.

But to Fran it was a curious joy to sit back in her armchair and listen to them. There was no doubt about it; champagne had put an edge on Michael's wit, and his spirits grew even higher as the night progressed. He was—the one word, beyond all others, that occurred to her—*radiant*. . . . And John was his perfect opponent, parrying all his verbal onrushes with deft counter-thrusts that somehow kept the argument manageable.

After Michael had gone that night John said: "He's just

the same, isn't he? Still full of hare-brained schemes and wild ideas. . . . Seems to me he won't keep that fortune of his very long, especially if he takes up every scrounger he meets along the road."

"You mean this man Matthews he talked about?" she queried, and he nodded.

She did not tell him that Matthews was, almost beyond the shadow of a doubt, Peter.

7

After the first sharp surprise of their meeting, Fran found that Michael had re-entered her life with a minimum of disturbance. He had merely drifted back again as suddenly and as casually as he had drifted away four years before. He seemed entirely without grudge for the years of exile, and John, on his side, was equally eager to forget the past.

She expected to meet Michael rather frequently now that he was in London. John had given him a cordial invitation to stay at Sky Peals for the time, but he had declined, on the ground of having already made other plans with Matthews. Besides, it would not be long before he settled down somewhere in a place of his own. "I've had enough of globe-trotting," he said. "What I want to do now is to . . ." But that was just where, as always, he was vague. He simply did not know what, in any considerable detail, he was going to do. John said that was his usual predicament; he had ideas, but no plans.

But about a week after their first meeting she received from him this letter:

DEAR FRAN,—

I've heaps of news to tell you. Matthews and I have arranged to go into partnership along the lines I tried to outline to you last week; he seems very keen about it, and wants us to begin right away. We're now

looking out for a suitable site somewhere in the slum districts, where we can begin our institute, or whatever it's going to be called. So far, we've decided one thing, that we're going to have absolutely as much music and colour as the place will hold. Can I meet you some time next week? Probably by then we shall have decided something more definitely, and you can come and see what it is. Anyhow, you'll like to meet Matthews — he's a great fellow, in the most literal sense. I enclose a snapshot of him and me taken together. By the way, he knows now who I am; it really was rather awkward not telling him. I thought perhaps he might return the compliment, but he didn't. Next week, then, if you can possibly arrange a time. . . .

She picked up the inch-square photograph that had slipped out of the envelope on to the table. The last shadow of doubt was dispersed; Matthews *was* Peter.

It was certain that she could not avoid, sooner or later, a meeting with him. Knowing now who Michael was, he would know whom to expect, and would therefore be prepared for her; he would realize, no doubt, as she did, that Michael need never know what had happened between him and Nan. That was, and ought to be, a secret from all whom it did not concern; and, most certainly, it did not concern Michael.

She wrote back an acceptance of the invitation, and a meeting was fixed for the following Wednesday. On the evening before John came home with news. "You're going to see Michael to-morrow, aren't you?" he said, and when she nodded, he continued: "Well, I can tell you something about him already. He's just bought an old billiard-hall not far from the tannery. Going to turn it into a club and institute, so I've heard. But the really tragic part is that he's paid two thousand for it, and it isn't worth five hundred. Why on earth didn't he ask me to buy it for him if he wanted it?" He added: "I think if there's one thing in the world that really passionately annoys me, it's to see waste—even of other people's money."

Martin drove her to the meeting-place the next morning. It was a corner public-house about a quarter of a mile from the tannery. The whole neighbourhood was lifelessly squalid on a cold December morning; the men were at work, the children at school, the public-houses closed, the streets forsaken. An icy wind blew up from the river, bringing with it the mingled smells of the docks; and above the jangle of trams and lorries there came, rather forlornly at times, the hooting of syrens from the Pool.

Michael was waiting for her on the pavement—smartly dressed, and obviously delighted with her, himself and the world in general. "Come back about two o'clock this afternoon," he told Martin, without waiting for Fran either to confirm or object. Then he turned to her and laughed. "Oh, you *must* have lunch with us, Fran. It won't be a good lunch, but it'll be quite as sumptuous as John would give you if you went to the tannery. Come along—our place is only just round the corner. . . . We've called it the 'Lighthouse.' There's crowds of workmen on it already, making alterations. The whole of the front's going to be painted a rich, warm crimson. Don't you think that's rather a fine idea? We want something glaring. . . . Don't you feel somehow that what this district lacks most of all is just stark, crude colour? Why do so many people prefer 'buses to trams? Mayn't it be because the 'buses are painted a lovely crude vermillion, whereas the London trams are all that dreadful chocolatey brown—the colour of stale blood? . . . Of course, inside we're going to have softer, smoother, more subtle colours, but outside—I feel that crimson will somehow symbolize our simple, straightforward opposition to all the ugliness round about—to all *this*. . . ." He waved his hand across the drab, garbage-littered street. "A gigantic splash of colour to show that—fundamentally—we're rebels."

He went on without giving her time to comment: "It's quite a large place we've got. An old billiard-hall—cost two thousand. Matthews thinks we ought to have got it for less, but I must say I rather agree with the man who sold it—it *is* a commanding site, and you can't expect to get a commanding site for nothing. . . . Anyhow, we shall get the building alterations done cheaply, because Matthews got estimates from different people and chose the lowest. Smart of him, eh? Oh, he *is* smart, I can tell you. You'll be meeting him in a minute. . . . Ah, there you are!" He turned suddenly down a side-street and pointed ahead. "See that building with all the scaffolding round it? That's our little place!"

He spoke of it with pride, but Fran's first glance inclined her to think that it was the most depressing building and situated in the most depressing spot she had ever seen. It commanded nothing except a long street of slum-houses and the wall of a brewery; moreover, it faced the north-west, so that it would never get the sun. "Except at evening," Michael explained. "But just think of how the sunset will strike against the crimson! Why, it will set the whole street on fire!" So far, however, the crimson had not been applied, and the first coat of paint, a patchy cream on top of the peeling stucco, was hardly prepossessing.

The interior, in course of being partitioned into separate rooms, was completely littered with builders' materials. "Better come along to our own room," said Michael. "It's right at the end—the men haven't tackled it yet. We shall find Matthews there, I daresay."

They found Matthews there. He was studying blue-prints beneath one of the large green-shaded lights that had formerly illumined a billiard-table. Fran thought immediately that he looked older and more careworn.

Michael introduced them, and then (the one thing that she

had half-hoped, half-feared) left them alone together while he went back to give directions to the workmen.

8

"So you're here, Peter," she began, eager to break the tension.

He smiled. He did not speak; he looked at her as much as to say: You can begin this conversation *if* you like and *how* you like. It's you who have sought me out, not I you. . . .

She went on, after a doubtful pause: "I knew it was you, because Micky sent me a snapshot. And I had guessed even before that. . . . Isn't it extraordinary that you and he should have met like that—in the meadows—and without telling each other who you were?"

His smile became broader. "An almost fabulous coincidence," he replied. "I really *do* feel that I am getting to know your family—at last."

"Yes," she agreed, smiling back at him. She was relieved at any rate that he had begun to speak. On the whole, she felt that the conversation would probably be easier without Michael than with him.

"I gather," he went on, "that John banished Micky some years ago as a punishment for misbehaviour?"

She demurred. "I don't quite see the point of raking up the past, Peter. Not *that* past, at any rate. Especially as Micky doesn't seem to be nourishing a grievance."

"True." He added, reflectively: "But *why* isn't he? *I* know why. Because he's forgotten all about it. It's just like him—to forget. I'll tell you Micky's character, if you don't know it already. He's all fire and enthusiasm, and youth and generosity, and (in his most powerful moments) obstinacy. But he's got a short memory."

"Well?"

"It's a good thing, in one way. And yet in another way it's rather bad. It makes him that he doesn't know his own mind —because he can't remember his own past."

Michael came back then, bounding into the room as excitedly as a schoolboy. "Now then," he cried, "you two know each other by now, I should guess. Come along with me, and I'll show you over the place in detail, Fran. I want to tell you exactly what we're going to do—what our aims are—and—and so on. . . ."

But that was just what, even still, he could not tell her. After hours of his eager, impetuous explanations, she had no clearer idea of his aims and functions of the "Lighthouse."

She had just one other moment with Peter alone before leaving after lunch. And he said then: "My job, as perhaps you can guess, will be to help Micky to know his own mind."

9

It was some time before she saw Michael again. But intermittently from John she gathered that the "Lighthouse" was beginning to function, if not absolutely to flourish.

John soon discovered the identity of Michael's partner. She had expected that. "It's odd that they should have met," was his comment, "but it's not at all odd that, having met, Michael should go mad about him and share with him a small fortune. And it's not at all odd that Peter, or Matthews, or whatever he calls himself, should accept treatment of that kind without the least demur. From what we already know of both of them they're just the pair for showering gifts and taking them." He added, cautiously: "I wouldn't tell mother anything about him, if I were you."

"Why not?" she asked, with instant suspicion; and his reply, calm and apologetic, was: "Oh, well, think it over and do just

what you think fit. I was only offering advice, that was all."

Towards the "Lighthouse" venture itself he seemed critical but benevolent. "Of the two of them, perhaps the senior partner is the less unbusiness-like. For instance, in the matter of the building alterations, he took the obvious precaution of getting estimates from the various firms and choosing the lowest. But Michael's been going about during the men's work-time (I've heard this on good authority) saying: 'Oh, I think I'll have a door here, and a window there, and this wall built up a bit higher,' and so on. Result—the extras on the bill come to nearly as much as the original estimate. I tell you, as I go past the place as I sometimes do, I can almost see the twelve thousand dissolving before my eyes."

"But what is it they're going to do?" she asked. "After all, that's the main thing."

John smiled. "*I* don't know. And I don't believe they know, either. So far, they've begun a literary society and an art class. Michael's down for a paper on 'Colour in Everyday Life.' There was a crowd round the place the other day because he was giving away pictures. Of course it's easy enough to get a crowd in Bermondsey if you start giving things away."

She seemed rather troubled by what he had told her. "Do you really think Micky's got a chance of doing any real good?" she persisted.

"I don't see why not. Anyhow, I've hopes. . . . And, as a matter of fact, I've been thinking of asking him if I might go into partnership with the two of them."

"*What?*" She laughed. "Are you joking?"

"Indeed, I'm not. I agree with a great deal that Michael says about Bermondsey being dull and drab and dirty and colourless. Because I'd give the people hot baths and Michael would give them pictures isn't any reason why we shouldn't join forces, surely? My business experience would

be useful to them, if nothing else. Anyhow, I've written to Michael asking if he'll put me down for a paper one evening at his literary society."

10

The answer came a few days later, and John showed it to her. It was typically impertinent:

DEAR JOHN,—

I didn't guess you were particularly literary, but still, I daresay we could give you an evening if you'd like one. What'll be your subject? And shall we bill you as the Uncrowned King of Bermondsey?

John replied that he would speak on "Ideals in Industry," and the evening was fixed for the second week in January. His business arrangements, including a hurried visit to Paris, made the time rather difficult to fit in. He wrote:

I have to catch the night boat from Dover, so the following time-table must be adhered to absolutely:—Begin paper 8.0 prompt; end paper 8.40 —10 mins. for questions; leave 8.55 prompt.

Michael replied again by a rather absurd letter in which he said:

I have adopted your methods with great success these cold winter mornings: Waken 9.0, decide to get up 9.55, decide to get up after all 10.20 prompt, put on my left sock 10.55. . . .

The day came. Fran had meant to be present to hear John's paper, but almost at the last minute Nan was unwell and she was compelled to stay with her at Sky Peals. John promised, however, to write immediately he reached Paris and tell her how the affair had gone.

11

But she did not have to wait so long as that.

On the afternoon of the following day snow fell—the first snow of the season. She sat reading by the library fireside,

while the strange, pale radiance floated in from the whitening lawns; Nan had gone to bed, and everything in the house was silent. She felt herself sinking into a mood of peaceful depression; one of those moods in which, no matter how hard she tried, she could not think of anything in the world that she wanted.

Towards tea-time the snow fell more heavily, and it was while she was standing by the window watching it that she saw Michael striding along from the meadows towards the house. And at that moment depression suddenly left her, and desire came like a leaping animal—not desire for any thing or person, but just desire, poignant and unanalyzable.

Two minutes later he was by the fire with her, and she saw at once that he was furious about something. He looked as he had looked years before when he discovered that John had written to Oxford about his books. She rather welcomed his attitude, and preferred it to any conceivable other; it seemed to accord with her own changed mood.

"You've come to tea," she said smiling. "That's really nice of you. It's so tedious here on a winter's afternoon when John's away and Nan's in bed. Shall we have tea now?"

"If you like. What's the matter with Nan?"

"Oh, nothing serious. She's always like this when John's away. I think she's lonely without him. . . . How are *you?*"

He answered rather gloomily: "I haven't come to cheer you up. I've come—as I used to come years ago"—he smiled wryly—"to lay my grumbles at your feet."

"Even that I don't mind."

"But this grumble's more serious than any I can remember."

"Well, you can't remember many, can you?"

"Can't I?" He seemed suddenly to be searching—or rather groping—into the past. "D'you know," he resumed, "I really think you're right—I *can't* remember very much about all that

happened years ago. What I remember best is when you and I were very little. . . . Old Grim—I can remember *her* all right. Those schoolroom lunches when she used to teach us the art of polite conversation—do you remember them?—If we ever stopped talking she used to say, 'Frances, start a topic'—and you never *could* start a topic, could you?" He laughed and went on: "And I can remember heaps of other things about you and me, but not much about anybody else. Well . . . oh, look here—I *must* get on to my grumble, or I shall forget even that. It's about John. You know he gave a paper to my literary society last night?"

"Yes. Wasn't he a success?"

"A *success?*" he echoed dismally. "I think you'd better listen while I tell you just what happened. A *success?* Good Lord. . . ."

12

He told her, mingling his words with those rapid staccato gestures of hand and arm that were almost a part of language to him. "A *success?*" he still reiterated. He gave her a smile of profound mockery and added: "Yes, I think that's just about what he was—more than anything else."

He continued, gathering momentum: "A roaring, howling, screeching success—like everything else John ever did. Like the Savage boot. Like the farms. Like this—this happy home. . . ." He stared round the room. "Place packed out half-an-hour before time. Ninety per cent tannery people—been given the tip to go and hear the boss. John comes punctually to the dot, puts gold watch on desk in front of him, looks at it with 'time-is-money' expression. Roars of cheers. . . . John begins. Mutual service—co-operation—utmost for the pi-est—all the usual stuff. Turns off the tap at eight-forty sharp, according to plan. Salvos of applause. Cannonades of cheering.

One damn fool shouts out, 'Three cheers for Sir John Savage' —like a school prize distribution. Any questions? Long pause. Then old Watkins on his hind legs—senior clerk in the tannery office— perhaps you know him?—elderly sort of chap, can't sound his 'r's,' pale face, pince-nez, no chin. Says he can't add anything to the most excellent and thoughtful address which he hopes will 'bear fwuit in all ou' w'arts. . . .' Says he's sure we shouldn't like to let Sir John go away without thanking him. . . . Five minutes of slop. Then says, 'I happen to know that Sir John has had to make a gweat personal effort to be pwesent here this evening, and unfortunately he cannot wemain long with us as he has to leave by the night expwess for Pawis. . . .' That 'night express for Paris' just about did it. Audience stares wide-eyed, awe-stricken. People in Bermondsey don't leave by the night express for Paris—sort of thing isn't done. Roars of applause when Watkins finishes. John gets up, grins, says 'Thank you all very much.' Hopes that by means of this excellent enterprise, for which he most cordially wishes every success, he will continue to be brought into closer touch. . . . More slop. Then 8.55. John puts watch in pocket, says 'Good-night,' and walks out to waiting Rolls-Royce. Some damn fool begins 'For he's a jolly good fellow.' Whole audience bleats in unison. Nothing to do after John's gone but wind up meeting. Huge success. Everybody delighted. Immense. Stupendous. Colossal. . . ."

He was gasping and his eyes gleamed wildly. "Fran," he cried, banging his hand on the arm of the chair, "Fran, I won't have it! Even if it means another row, I won't have it! I'd no idea, when he offered to speak——"

"But, Micky—what is it that you object to? Surely——"

"*This,* most of all," he cried, diving into his pocket and producing a letter. "Got this this morning. Posted at Dover late last night. John must have written it on the train." He

handed it to her, and while she read it, he went on, with rising indignation: "Wants to join me and Matthews as a partner. Offers us a financial share. Thinks we might—the three of us —by *co-operation*. . . . Co-operation be damned—I know what that means. He'll commandeer the whole show and make it a sort of adjunct to the tannery."

"Well, then," she replied calmly, "your course is quite plain. You just thank him for his offer and decline it. That's easy enough."

"Oh, yes, it's easy enough . . . but—to me—it seems so hateful—that there are people who go about life—as John does—just grabbing what he can get hold of—factories, farms, houses—even—even this sort of thing—this thing of mine that he doesn't understand and never could. . . . He just sees something, wants it, and gets it. And then it isn't 'it' any more, but something else—something quite different—something with 'John Savage' written all over it. . . ."

He had been speaking quietly, and she was curiously impressed. It was as if he had been stating, carefully and with difficulty, a sort of creed that he believed in. When he had finished there was no indignation left in him at all; he was tranquil and a little sad.

Her eyes softened as she watched him. "Write him a refusal, Micky," she said. "And don't be afraid he'll be offended; he's not like that. By the way, what does your friend think of the matter?"

"Matthews?" he exclaimed, with a lift of the eyebrows. "Oh, there's no doubt about what *he* thinks. He hates John like poison."

13

After tea she asked him if he would stay on to dinner, and he answered: "Oh, rather. I was just hoping you'd ask me.

Last night's meeting and this morning's letter have made me feel rather fed up, and it's ever such a relief to talk to you."

"Is it?'

"It always was."

That was the keynote of all their conversation. *It always was.* Certain things were, and always had been, and slowly, with infinite gradualness, they were rediscovering them. After dinner the snowing ceased, and the moon shone full and serene; when they went into the library together it was as if they were wading through silver pools. "Don't draw the blinds," he said, and added quickly: "You wouldn't dare, would you?"

He went straight to the piano, and she followed him, hoping and yet half-fearing that he would play, for if he did she knew that something in her would crumple up and surrender to him, instantly.

He struck a chord. "People don't play this piano very often, do they?"

"Not very often. John doesn't care much for music, you see, nor does Nan."

"And you?"

"I try to play sometimes, when I'm alone. But I can't do it very well, and it rather annoys me to do it badly."

"You'd rather go without things altogether than put up with the second-best?"

"Yes."

"So would I."

He spoke those three words like a benediction. Then he began to play some wild bursting tune, thrumming and throbbing like a dynamo of passion—limitless, yet profoundly and enchantingly disciplined. "I heard this when I was in New Zealand. The Maoris sang it at Rotorua—with the ukelele. It seems to whisper to you that something *will* happen, and

must happen, yet it doesn't make you excited—it just gives you that—that icy, breathless calm that is beyond everything."

Then he sang. The first rich notes sent through her just what he had foretold—an icy, breathless calm. And amidst the calm there gleamed in the depths of herself a little frozen atom of happiness. Happiness merely to be with him. Happiness merely to be so close to him that, without his knowing it, she could brush her cheek against his wildly straggling hair. Happiness (for the time being) merely to watch his eyes and lips and hands, to see and recognize all the things she had always remembered—his smile, especially, and the mole on the back of his left hand which in the old days they had called "Christopher." How foolish to be so happy! Yet she could not, would not, help it.

As soon as he had finished he cried, impetuously: "Now we'll go out for a walk." He pointed far over the white and glistening spaces. "Fran, can you ever remember the snow and the moonlight together like this? *I* can't."

She said, rather sadly: "But then you don't remember things, do you?"

"Not things that just happen—no. But things that I *feel*—I never forget *them*." He opened the door on to the terrace, and the keen air greeted them like a strong man's hand-grip. "The meadows of the moon!" he exclaimed, breathing deeply. "There now—do you remember *that?*"

Yes, she remembered. It seemed to her, moments later, as she walked with him through the trackless meadows, that she could remember little else.

She was speaking to him as if they were resuming a conversation begun ages before and in a different world.

"Why was it, Micky, that you never wrote after you went away?"

He laughed. "Oh, I didn't think you'd be very keen to hear

from me. I rather had the impression you thought I was in the wrong—in that business about the books. . . . Anyhow, I *was* going to write, when I'd got properly settled down out there. And then when I threw up the job I didn't fancy writing to tell you about it—it seemed rather awful to say I couldn't stick it because the work was too hard. . . . And then came the news that you'd married John. Startled me—in a way. . . . I just felt I didn't know what sort of letter to write after that, so I—just—didn't write. . . . That was all."

The snow in the meadows had blown into deep drifts, and they sank into them sometimes up to their knees. They walked on and on, and Michael changed the subject, and neither of them dared to return to it again. He linked his arm through hers, to save her from sinking into the drifts, and she felt then, as the warmth of his body blended with hers, the memory of that old half-physical lure he had had for her in earlier days, something that had bewitched, not any one alone of her senses, but all of them together, and yet delicately.

"The trouble is, Micky," she said, as they came back to the house at last, "that you're such a child still."

"A child? I guess I've had a man's life, anyway."

Even his resentment at being called a child was childlike. She answered: "Yes, you've had a man's life. And I think it's made you rather more of a child than ever. . . ."

The next day she received a letter from John. It contained a brief and accurate account of the meeting.

The audience would have been small but for my men, who turned up rather well. On the whole, the affair went off decently enough, and the applause at the finish was even enthusiastic. Some of the compliments to me were overdone and old Watkins smothered me with praise and insisted on telling everybody I was off to Paris that night. Tuft-hunting ass—I suppose he's after promotion. . . . I wrote to Michael asking if I might join in the venture as a third partner, but he hasn't answered yet—there's been hardly time, of course. Michael would undoubtedly benefit

by having a little more business ability to draw on, for, after all, the first necessity for doing good, as for doing anything else, is knowing *how*. . . .

14

John came back from Paris exactly as she had been certain he would—that is to say, exactly the same. A letter from Michael awaited him on his return; it contained, as Fran guessed, a more or less courteous refusal to his offer to join in the "Lighthouse" enterprise. "I rather expected it," John remarked, without the least sign of resentment. "And I can't *make* them have me, can I? But I do think my business experience would have been a help."

Before long he had cause to reiterate this opinion. "They're beginning a good many new things at the Lighthouse," he reported to Fran. "Debating clubs and economic classes—queer way of pumping colour into Bermondsey. . . . Oh, yes, and even a holiday club on somewhat novel lines. You pay in so much a week, and then when you want the money you get it with ten per cent interest to date. *Ten per cent!* Absurd, of course. Must come out of Michael's pocket—I suppose he does it for the sake of advertisement. . . . Anyhow, crowds of people are joining—there's a full-time clerk now to look after the books. *Ten per cent,* though. I'm glad *my* money isn't in it."

He spoke of the Institute and its work in a light-hearted vein that was generally quite friendly. From his almost daily bulletin she judged that Michael must be the talk of Bermondsey. John said: "Bermondsey is quite used to Salvation Army meetings and cheap-jack auctions of worthless jewelry, but people who distribute Medici prints and enamel their frontdoors crimson are a new species. . . ."

She did not see Michael as often as she had expected; indeed, most of what was happening at the Institute came to her

through John. The whole situation was immensely complicated by Peter; but for him, she felt that relationship with Michael would have presented no problems, either to herself or to John. She did not understand Peter, or his attitude; according to John, it was he who was beginning the economic and political side of the Institute's work, while Michael still dreamed of music and colour.

But, as a matter of fact, the Institute and its work puzzled her altogether. One evening, without forewarning Michael, she went down to Bermondsey and paid a visit. The building was full of people, and there was no one to ask her business or prevent her from entering any of the rooms. In one of them a meeting was in progress; she could not gather the subject, but she saw Peter on the platform through a haze of strong tobacco smoke. It seemed to her that he was attacking something or somebody; the audience was as outwardly phlegmatic as any British audience can be, but beneath the calm was just an undercurrent of feeling that his words had stirred. . . . He was an excellent speaker; she could have guessed that. She wanted to stay longer and listen to the end, but the atmosphere of body-heat and thick shag drove her away almost immediately.

In another room youths were reading, chattering, playing table-tennis, and mildly "ragging about"; in yet another a pale-faced clerk was collecting money from men and women who formed up in a queue in front of his table.

And in the furthest room of all, right at the back of the building, she found Michael. What he was doing or why he was doing it should could form no idea. At first (before she opened the door very timidly) she wondered if murder or riot were taking place; the din seemed composed of all possible sounds, human and artificial. Then when she opened the door an inch or two she saw him. He was sitting at a tiny cottage

piano surrounded by a heaving and struggling crowd of youngsters aged from eleven to fifteen or thereabouts. Some were singing, some were shouting, some were stamping on the floor, some were making ear-splitting sounds with combs and pieces of paper. And amidst a slight lull in the pandemonium she heard Michael's voice, as wild and boyish as any of the rest: "Come along now—let's have something good!"

She could not, even if she had wished, have attracted his attention save by a physical struggle through the crowd. Then suddenly he began to play. (Somebody had placed a sheet of newspaper against the piano-wires, and the effect was that of a very inferior banjo.) Nevertheless, Michael struck up very loudly the final marvellous movement of the Kreutzer Sonata. Almost immediately the mob of lads and girls joined in, shouting it, whistling it, playing it shrilly with combs, stamping their feet to it. . . . Some of them were even shouting words—they sounded like—"Riding down to Deptford on a 'bus from Camden Town. . . ." The noise of it all, majestically disciplined by the superb rhythm of the tune, was almost grand; but she wondered more than ever what Michael was reckoning to do.

15

She did not tell John of her surprise visit. For she had lately begun to feel that though his attitude towards the "Lighthouse" was so far friendly, it was ready, at the given moment, to become hostile.

That moment came about the beginning of March. Nan had been ill, and was in bed, and John, sitting by the bedside, disclosed his change of attitude. "It's pretty obvious why they didn't want me with them," he said. "I should have queered their pitch." He went on: "From what I hear, they're beginning to stir up trouble between work-people and employers

in the district. Matthews speaks at Rotherhithe on Saturday nights . . . seems to have blossomed out into a blood-red revolutionary. . . . Just let them begin making trouble at the tannery, that's all. I'll be ready for them."

"And Micky?" she whispered. "What does he do?"

"Oh, just an amiable nothing. He's clay in the hands of the other. . . . But then he always *was* like that—under *somebody's* influence."

He added: "But, as things are going at present, the thing can't last long. The precious Institute will go bankrupt before it's had time to do very much harm."

16

Nan was no better the next morning. All night long she had been awake with a kind of feverish neuralgia; John delayed his departure for town until Myles came, and the latter was so fatuously complacent that John lost patience. "If mother's no better by lunch-time," he told Fran, "ring me up and I'll send somebody who knows his job."

She rang him up almost as soon as she judged he would have reached the tannery. "She's no better, John. Rather worse, if anything. . . ." John's reply came briskly: "All right. I'll send somebody." It was at such moments that she liked him most of all; he was so prompt, so capable, so utterly, absolutely reliable.

The man he sent was Sir Geoffrey Meneage, of Welbeck Street, a youngish specialist with a world-renowned reputation. He arrived at Sky Peals in the afternoon, made a long and careful examination of Nan, and then went down with Fran into the library. She never forgot the short interview she had with him there—in that library where there had been so

many interviews. She had the feeling that she was on trial, and that he was cross-examining her.

He began, gravely: "Perhaps you could tell me a little about Mrs. Savage."

She told him that Nan had not had perfect health for some time past, but that neither she nor John nor the local doctor had judged the ailments to be serious.

"I was not thinking so much of that," he answered, "as of her life in general. . . . Do you know if she has worries of any kind?"

"I—I don't think she has—now."

He suddenly swung round and faced her abruptly. "May I ask you a question, Lady Savage? I merely want a 'yes' or 'no' in answer to it, and I will promise not to enquire further. Has there been sometime during—let us say—the past six or nine months—a shock—a very considerable shock—in Mrs. Savage's life?"

She replied, very softly, and after a long pause: "Yes. There *has* been—a shock."

He kept his word and made no further enquiry, nor did she volunteer further information. But he nodded profoundly and said: "Then you may take it that that shock, whatever it was, is the cause of her present condition. . . . She will get better, but she will never be the same—in mind—again."

John came home before Sir Geoffrey left, and the two had a long private conversation in John's study. What exactly were the revelations made and discussed, Fran never knew: John was very reticent afterwards. All he said was: "It seems to be brain trouble—of a certain kind. We must make up our minds to be very gentle—whatever she says or does."

Whatever she says or does! The words burrowed into her mind and darkly echoed there. "John," she cried, anxiously,

"tell me just what you mean by that. Do you mean that Nan——"

"I mean," he interrupted, "that we can't—we *mustn't*—expect her to be the same again. She's had a shock, Meneage says, and it's affected her brain."

She looked him straight between the eyes. "You can guess what the shock was, can't you?"

"Yes, of course. It was that fellow—Peter—Matthews—coming here. He oughtn't to have come. He might have known that to a woman of mother's age a sudden shock——"

"John." She spoke very softly. "It wasn't Peter coming that was the shock. It was Peter going away. You know that, don't you?"

Not till she had spoken the words did she perceive their full import, that they undermined his strength and turned his victory to ashes. But he did not or could not see it. He answered rather sharply: "Peter somehow or other—that's the main thing. He's the cause of it."

All she said then was: "Poor Nan—it doesn't much matter what caused it, now that it's happened."

17

Michael came that evening (she had wired to him about Nan), and the two of them sat for over an hour in Nan's bedroom, watching the ceaseless ebb and flow of pain like waves over a broken ship. Nan's eyes were wide open all the time, but she seemed to see nobody in the room, and when Michael spoke to her she neither looked nor stirred. Only when he was leaving did she utter a sound; she looked up then and seemed to glimpse another in the room beside herself and pain. And she cried, softly: "Don't go. . . . *Peter.*"

He came back to her bedside and stayed for an hour longer, but she did not speak again or seem even to notice him.

Downstairs afterwards he took Fran's arm and led her into the firelit library. "She called me Peter," he said. "Did you notice?"

She wondered what she should tell him. But he went on, steadily: "You needn't explain. I know all about it. Matthews —or rather Peter, as I prefer to call him now—has told me everything."

"Told you?—When—why—did he tell you?"

"He told me a few hours ago, just after I'd got your wire. If he hadn't told me, I should have thought he was mad. . . . Because of his face—his eyes—when I said I'd have to come here at once because my mother was ill. . . . *His eyes!*"

He went on: "*He* wants to see mother, too."

"I'm not certain if he can, Micky."

"But he's going to—if—if he thinks he ought to."

"What does that mean?"

"If he thinks she'd like him to go and see her."

"Well?"

"I think her saying 'Don't go, Peter' to me rather shows she *is* thinking of him and would like to see him. Don't you?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

"I shall tell him about it, anyway, and I think I know what *he'll* think." He raised his voice suddenly. "Fran, he's *got* to see her. Surely, if she wants it and he wants it, you can't stop them."

"*I* can't Micky, and I wouldn't. But John——"

"John . . . *John* . . . JOHN . . . *JOHN*. . . ," He shouted each repetition with increasing loudness. "Everything's John. . . . You talk about him just as Nan used to. . . . *Damn* John. I'm on Peter's side in this. John's got no right—and never had any right——"

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun; his anger seemed to collapse all at once like a pricked balloon. When he spoke again it was with a slow anguish that seemed to tear through him to free itself. "Oh, *how* you've changed, Fran. When we were young it was always John that you didn't care about—you used to help me to stand up against him *then*. And once, just after that car-smash on the Myvern Road we were walking through the meadows and I said—'You won't ever let John persuade you to take his side against me?' And you said—'I don't feel I shall ever let John persuade me to do anything.' That's what you said then. You reckon I've a short memory, but those are the things I remember and you forget. . . . Oh, Fran— how different—how lovely you were then . . . and you've forgotten it all—*so* soon!"

She sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. "Micky, I haven't forgotten," she cried, sobbing. "I haven't forgotten *any* of it. . . ."

18

After he had gone she sat for hours by the fire in Nan's room and wondered what they had been talking about. . . . About Nan, of course, and Peter. . . . And yet about something else, something that had passed between them like an eager ghost, breathing a word here and a word there. . . .

Nan was just slightly better. Towards midnight she stirred a little, moving her head very slightly and looking round the room. She stared at Fran a long while before the latter saw her and smiled.

Then she whispered: "Fran . . . Where've they all gone?"

"The nurse is away for an hour or two—she'll be back soon. And so will John—he's only been gone a little while. He'll be so pleased to see you looking better."

Nan was silent again for some moments. Then, in the same tired, half-waking voice: "Where's Peter?"

"Peter?"

"Yes. . . . Where is he?"

"Why—he's—he's—gone——"

"Gone?"

There was such deep sadness in the word that Fran was driven to a lie. "Yes . . . for the time being. . . ." She saw Nan's eyes focused on her with an intensity that touched her with panic. "Do you—would you like to see him, Nan?"

And the answer came: "I *can* see him . . . but he won't look at me. He's there—by the window. . . ." She tried to raise her hand to point, but it fell back limply. "Fran, tell him I want him to look at me—only to look at me——"

"Darling, there's nobody there—Peter's been gone a long while——"

"I know." The tired eyes gleamed. 'Ever so long. . . . Three years. . . . But he'll come back, as he promised. And then—then—John won't bother me any more. . . . Fran, there's somebody coming up the stairs now—can't you hear the footsteps?—It may be Peter—oh, Peter——"

"No, no—it's John."

The gleam vanished from her eyes like the instant snuffing out of a candle. "John," she murmured, and sank back on to the pillows.

The past was in the room—a living, enchanted spirit, stirring all the cold embers into flame. There was no present; the past and the future were the only real things in the world. Those old days when she had said "I don't feel I shall ever let John persuade me to do anything"; those old days, further back still, when Nan had been so confident—"He'll come back, as he promised, and then John won't bother me any more. . . ."

John came in.

As soon as she saw him, Fran felt sorry for him; he looked so troubled and careworn.

"Mother better?"

"I think perhaps she is—slightly."

"Sleeping?"

"I don't know. She may be."

"Michael gone?"

"Oh, yes, a long while ago."

Silence. And then, rather sharply: "A pity. I wanted a word with him."

"With Micky?"

"Yes. I said there'd be trouble if they began interfering with tannery business. Well, they've begun."

"How?"

"Had to sack a man a week ago—slacking. Been warned before. And now this confounded Institute reckons to take the matter up. They should mind their own business—it'll take them all their time."

"But, John—what can they do?"

"Nothing at all—except make trouble. But that's serious enough. And that's why I stayed late—to find out the particular brand of trouble that's afoot."

"Well?"

"Open-air meeting at Rotherhithe. I borrowed Martin's overcoat and went to it."

That, coming after the tension of the day, made her laugh hysterically. "Oh, how funny you must have looked!—And didn't anyone recognize you?"

"No. It was dark, of course. . . . Anyhow, I know now just what I'm up against."

"What?"

"An exceedingly clever and dangerous enemy. The things

he said about me—about me personally—while I was listening to-night—made me boil—positively boil with——"

"Yes?—With what?"

He dropped his voice as he answered: "With—almost—with a sort of admiration for the fellow's damnable cleverness. . . . But, by God, if there's going to be a fight, he'll get it."

She said, in a far-off whisper: "The odd thing is that I was going to ask you if he could come here and see Nan."

She expected an instant refusal, but instead of that he gave her a look both thoughtful and puzzled. "Has she asked for him?" he said.

"Yes . . . in a sort of way."

She saw his eyes tighten till the lids almost closed over them. Then he said, with every word monotonously distinct: "It's just a matter of what's best for her, that's all. Every other consideration must be ruled out. . . . I'll see what Meneage says about it in the morning. . . ."

She had never, never felt his power so much as then.

19

Meneage must have given the required permission, for the next day John told her very calmly that Peter could visit Nan if he wished. "But *you* must communicate with him," he added. Beyond that he made no comment and expressed no opinion.

The curious thing was that she wrote to Peter and received no reply.

Meanwhile, the crisis of Nan's illness passed, and the slow, partial recovery began. To Fran the quiet, firelit days in the sickroom were always associated with Michael. He came far oftener to Sky Peals now, and usually in the afternoons when his Institute work could most easily be left. Nan was often

asleep, and he and Fran used to sit close together by the fireside and talk in whispers. He talked endlessly of the Lighthouse, of the work he was trying to do there, of the clubs and art classes. He believed in Rhythm. "Train people in Rhythm and they'll think Rhythmically, move Rhythmically, live Rhythmically." Navvies swinging sledgehammers—perfect Rhythm. . . . He had begun a Rhythm class at the Lighthouse, and had found that Rhythm appealed irresistibly to young boys and girls. He had set the final movement of the Kreutzer Sonata to words, and the class had learned to sing it —not necessarily in tune (tune didn't matter) but in Rhythm. . . . Wasn't it a great idea?

She whispered: "Micky, shall I say what John used to say when we were children?"

"What?"

" 'Sort of idea you *would* have.' " She tried to mimic John's rather clipped tones.

He laughed softly. "Is it a compliment, Fran, to say that?"

"I think perhaps—in a way—it *is.*"

Then she asked him about Peter, and told him of the letter she had written and that Peter had not answered. He was surprised. Peter had received the letter he knew, for he had seen the crested envelope amongst the correspondence. "But he never discussed it with me. He's rather reticent, you know —even to me." Once she got him talking about Peter it wasn't easy to stop him. "Oh, Peter's *great,* Fran. I admit I hero-worship him. I simply can't help it. The way he *hurls* himself into the Lighthouse work—has classes and meetings every night—economics and political economy and all sorts of things —not much in my line, but still, it's all good for people, I suppose. *You* ought to agree—you used to be keen on economic history, didn't you? . . . I tell you, Fran, Peter's making the whole place absolutely *GO*. . . . And have you ever

heard him speak? You haven't, have you—in public, I mean?" (She did not tell him that she had.) "He speaks like an angel. Fran, I've never known anybody I've liked so much—*loved* so much, almost (Is that an absurd word to use about a man?) —except—perhaps—*you.*" He said that very simply, and without any shyness or embarrassment.

20

Nan got slowly better; but it was as Meneage had prophesied; she was different, and she would never be the same again. But, contrary to Fran's worst fears, the change was not wholly for the bad. The old listlessness had become almost a tranquillity; the eyes that had been so dull and lifeless were now transfigured by a joy that was often child-like. She walked more, talked more, seemed altogether more active. Michael, with his curious habit of using words beyond their mere meaning, said of her: "She looks as if she'd come over a mountain —into evening."

But, as he also said—"She has her mind pillowed in the past." It stayed there, brooding happily for hours, and sometimes—more frequently as time went on—it *fixed* itself, and could not be brought back without a wrench. She loved to sink her memory like a net amidst the half-forgotten years, and bring back riches to sort out and examine at leisure. But sometimes the net was too full and too heavy, and she could not bring it *quite* back. She used to remember Peter, something that Peter had done or said years before, and then suddenly . . . she would *see* Peter. It was odd at first, but in time they got used to it. Peter became almost a joke at last, a joke which they all, even Nan herself, could share. "The loveliest part of her is that she can laugh at herself," Michael said. At tea-times he often used to say—"Fill a cup for Peter."

Nan, before the past claimed her wholly, would laugh and answer: "All right, I'll not forget. And if he doesn't come, I can drink it."

Then, quite sharply and unexpectedly, perhaps in the midst of some totally irrelevant conversation, the past would descend, like a dark curtain falling between herself and the world. She was alone then on the hidden stage, talking and acting to an audience of ghosts, and seeing—who knows what or whom?—But always, anyhow, Peter. "Peter . . ." she would cry, with the joy of meeting him again, and then she would talk to him—quietly, for hours.

Talking with him never made her sad. It quickened the colour in her cheeks and the gleam in her eyes. Once Fran said: "Micky, can't you *feel*—somehow—from the way Nan talks—what sort of a man Peter used to be?"

He answered, with that sharp clairvoyant light in his eyes that so often preluded an odd remark: "More than that, Fran. I can feel what sort of a girl *she* used to be. She must have been rather—like you—before you married John."

She dared not ask him what he meant. The old lure was stealing through her senses and making her wonder—wonder. She felt suddenly afraid of him, and of his uncanny power to say such simple things that probed deeper than any argument. She saw then an instant tableau enacted before her eyes—John speaking calmly, weightily, pursuing every point with relentless logic, building up an absolutely impregnable case . . . and then Michael coming along, casual as always, and just demolishing all John's structure with some blinding phrase or sentence, unarguable and unanalyzable. . . . But John—and perhaps this was his power—would never know that his structure *was* demolished.

21

One of those dark March days stood out most clearly from the rest. It was the day on which John came home unexpectedly in the early afternoon, and found Michael, Nan, and herself at tea together in the library. John's face looked hard and worried, and as soon as the first civilities were over he said: "Look here, Michael, this gives me a chance to have a word with you. What's your idea in trying to make trouble at my works?"

Michael looked completely astonished. "I really don't know—" he was beginning, but John cut him short. "You *do* know," he asserted. "Or if you don't, then you ought to. This Institute of yours is trying to stir up trouble over that man Williams."

"Williams?—Oh yes, I know him—he's the secretary of our debating club."

"And the worst slacker I ever knew. I hate dismissing my men, but with him there was absolutely no alternative. . . . Now tell me frankly—Why are you backing him?"

It was an impossible contest—John, clear-voiced and stern and Michael, shuffling, half-smiling,and hesitating in reply. "I really don't know much about the man," he said at length.

John pounced upon him like a flash. "You can't escape responsibility. This enterprise is yours, financed by your money, and it's your job to see that it doesn't champion a man who isn't worth championing. And you can tell your partner from me——"

"You mean Peter," said Michael, and to Fran it seemed in one way the most marvellous thing he had ever said. There was a certain proud dignity in it, a winsome, boyish staunchness—something that was at any rate the utter opposite of John.

But it was on Nan that the effect was strangest. She just moved at first—that was all. It was as if something touched her and made her alive. "Peter," she whispered, with eyes suddenly gleaming.

John gave Michael a warning glance and said curtly: "Some other time—not now." Then he walked across the room to the window and looked out. He was always slightly uncomfortable when Nan talked about Peter. "We shall have rain soon," he remarked, merely to break the intolerable echoes of Nan's whispered word. "In fact I think it's beginning to rain already."

Something happened then that was like the bright leap of a sword from its scabbard. "Peter . . ." cried Nan, agonizingly, and broke down into overwhelming tears. "Peter—oh, Peter—it's raining and I can't go down to the meadows. . . . Oh, Peter—what a shame—*what* a shame!"

Her words seemed to split the moments into single pounding seconds; Fran looked at Michael and he looked back at her, and in the eyes of them both was the eager question: What are things going to be like *now,* after this . . . ?

22

Ten minutes later she was walking with him through the meadows. She hardly knew how or why. She had a vague recollection that she had pacified Nan, and that John had stood by uncomfortably, that Michael had then mentioned his train, and that John had whispered to her—"Leave me with mother a moment." So she had left him and gone out with Michael. . . . It was hardly raining yet, but the air was full of cool dampness, and far across the horizon the clouds heaped themselves in long grey rolls. The green and the grey were almost one amidst the deepening twilight.

All the way down from the house they had not spoken, but now, in sight of the old, familiar earth, the spell of silence lifted. He said, eagerly: "Fran, I *knew* you'd come. As soon as I asked you I knew you would."

"John asked me to leave him alone with Nan. That gave me an excuse. Otherwise——"

"Otherwise it would have been just the same."

"How do you know?"

"I know," he said, pressing his arm to hers, "that you don't belong to John when you're here. You *couldn't*."

"I don't know what you mean, Micky."

"Neither do I, altogether. He made her stop and stand still with him to face the cool, moist wind. "But, Fran—don't you feel how—how *safe*—we are here? These meadows of the moon are sanctuary—remember that."

The words echoed in her mind like a child's school-lesson. He went on: "They stand for—for all that's lovely—and that ever was lovely—against what Peter calls 'Savagery' . . . which is just a sort of—of calm greed."

"But the Savagery wins, Micky."

"No, no," he answered, excitedly. "Never in the end. Look at Nan. . . . The meadows have got *her* at last. And John's mighty uncomfortable about it."

She felt him then, as she had so often felt him years before, luring her by a charm that made body, mind, and spirit indissolubly one.

He went on: "Nan's happy. But you're not. I know you're not. And—though it sounds awful—I'm glad. I should hate you to be happy as you are now."

She laughed a little wildly. "Well, happiness isn't everything. *You* look happy enough."

"Yes, I'm happy—always—even when I'm miserable. Do you know what I mean? I'm always *wanting* things—wanting

things I can't get. There's never any real misery in desire. It's being too tired to desire—too sick with the world—*that's* the dreadful thing."

"What is it that you're always wanting?"

He answered, after a pause: "A sort of beauty—that's like flame and ice together."

She laughed. "Micky, *what* does that mean?"

"I don't know. . . . But I have a sort of hope that it means what *I* mean."

"A hope?"

He nodded. "It's a kind of dream I keep on having," he went on. "It comes to me at all sorts of strange times and places. I saw it last, for instance, in the eyes of a Bermondsey lad. . . . He'd just won a scholarship to a secondary school, and he begged me to get him an algebra-book to study from during his holidays. . . . And when I gave it him—just a shilling second-hand copy that I picked up in the Farringdon Road—the dream was there—there in his eyes—desire as pure as ever was in the world. . . . And I've seen it light up the faces of men in a crowd when Peter talks to them. And I've seen it—also—in you."

"Even now?" she whispered.

"Even now—in the meadows here—far more than ever anywhere before." Something shivered in his voice; he gripped her arm tightly and cried:

"Oh, Fran—it all comes to this—you oughtn't—you oughtn't *ever*—to have married John!"

That did not frighten her. It gave her almost a sense of calm and cooling relief. She answered softly: "Oh, I know —I know. And you—you oughtn't to have gone away."

He put his arm round her and felt the quickened beating of her heart. "I remember you, Fran, in your little brown dress when we used to play together here. And whenever I

see a speck of brown on a green background, I get a sort of thrill—even now. I used to think in those days—'Won't it be fine when Fran and I are grown up—we shan't have to do what John tells us then.' "

"But *you* did what John told you to do, Micky."

"Yes, and so did you."

"Yes."

He stooped a little towards her. "I'm not jealous of John," he said slowly. "I've got so much of you that he can't ever get—that he can't even guess. It's he that ought to be jealous, if he only knew. And—and what he has of you—just that—I can do without."

She turned to him with eyes utterly calm. "He hasn't even *that,* Micky. He never has had. We're almost strangers. . . . Oh, Micky—Micky—don't think I'm complaining—John's always been very kind to me—nobody could have been kinder." She added, as if divining what he might do: "Micky, don't kiss me. Don't do anything like that. Don't even hold me."

"Why not?"

"It's no good. You know why. I married John and there's an end of it."

"Is there? When Nan married, *that* wasn't the end of it. When Peter married, *that* wasn't the end of it. The end of it's where the beginning was—*here*—in the meadows." He went on, as if echoing the thoughts in her mind: "You know that's true, don't you? We're still so certain of what we mean, aren't we? There's no need to ask so many questions. We always were certain—so certain that when we were young we never cared what we did to each other . . . We never even troubled to be fair—as John always did. We felt we couldn't—not if we tried—do wrong to each other. But . . . in a way . . . we *ought* to have been fair." He added, with wistful tenderness: "I've been fairer to my bitterest enemies

than I've been to you, Fran. Somehow it no more occurred to me to be fair to you than to be fair to myself. I never separated us into you and me. You *were* me."

"I know . . . I know all that."

And then, without preamble, he told her the real reason he had asked her to come out with him. It was because he thought and feared that he would not be able to see her again for some time. "There's an awful storm brewing, Fran, between John and—and Peter and me. It's bound to happen sooner or later, so we may as well get it over. Peter, you see, hates John."

She almost closed her eyes with the pain of hearing his words. All that she had most of all feared was coming to pass; she saw the future darken like sudden nightfall. "And of course," she said softly, "you'll be on Peter's side?"

"Of course."

23

Afterwards, alone, when he had gone away, she cursed herself for having let him go at all. She saw him now, as she had only dreamed of him before, as the man she wanted—the boy-man whom she had loved always, ever since they had been children playing in the meadows together. He had loved her also, in his way, and if only he hadn't gone abroad, or, alternatively, if only she hadn't married John. . . . She looked back over the past with curious, puzzled eyes; why *had* Micky gone away? Some business about a few books. John finding the household accounts in a muddle and trying to economize. . . . Trivial, more trivial than ever when viewed across the spaces of the years.

But she wanted Micky now as if part of herself were wanting the other part; always, so it seemed to her now, she had been his, and she had never been any other man's. She was certain, and with the certainty there came, even into her anguish, a

confidence that made her stronger. She felt she wanted to follow him back to Bermondsey and argue it all out with him, to implore him not to drift away again. . . . And yet, if she did, what good could she do?

She saw then the whole power that was surrounding her, the power that did not drift, but stood rock-still, patient and unswerving. John. . . . She remembered him as a boy, calmly ordering herself and Michael to do things, and getting himself somehow obeyed; as a youth, stepping quickly into his heritage and scouring away the slackness that had grown up during Nan's régime; as a man, building up and strengthening with his own hands this edifice of power and usefulness and sound-based prosperity. Nothing that he ever did but succeeded—in the end—though the end might be long in coming. He never tired. Never gave way. Never knew that he had failed even if he had. Never lost through being too much in a hurry. "I am young," he had said, to those who scoffed at his farming improvements, "and I can afford to wait for profits."

She was a part, she knew, of his mighty Savage edifice. John had married her with all that in mind; he possessed her as utterly, if he had cared to insist on it, as he possessed the farms and the tannery. Yet so far he had waited—had left her unused as he might have left a field to lie fallow. And she did not know whether this attitude of his aroused most of all her fear or her admiration. She knew that he could have claimed her at any time; but he would not. She knew that definitely and according to fixed plan, he preferred to wait . . . expecting, *knowing* that he would get her in the end. Many a time she had almost longed for the end to come quickly, so that she might begin even to enjoy her chains; without loving him or desiring him she would yet have been willing and eager to bear him children, if he had wished it.

But he had not troubled her. He had been marvellously pa-

tient, restrained, kind. She remembered his words that night at Innsbrück—"On the whole, Fran, you must think I'm a pretty sort of cad. . . ." But the remembrance did not calm her; it stirred the very fears it ought to have banished. It was his kindness, his perfect, unendurable kindness that would, she knew, break her down in the end.

But now, with Michael in her mind, the inevitable swung suddenly into the impossible. She did not and could not ever belong to John.

24

As Michael had said, a storm was brewing. To her, at Sky Peals, the portents were not so clear as to John at the tannery, but even to her there was something dark and ominous in the atmosphere, some presage of trouble ahead in John's grim looks and late hours.

Peter, she gathered, was the root of the matter. "He's the worst type of agitator," John said. "He's a free lance, fishing in troubled waters for the sheer love of it." Beyond that, he told her very little; she could only guess that matters were going steadily worse. Then one evening in April he made another reference to the curious warfare that was springing up between the "Lighthouse" and the tannery. "Usually," he told her, "I play the waiting game myself, but when the other fellow's playing it as well, things are apt to be tedious. So I've made a move that ought to lead to something. I've sacked Elliot."

"*Elliot?*"—Your best foreman!"

"Best foreman or not, he made a bitter personal attack on me at the Institute last night. This morning I sent for him and told him to go. It'll cause trouble, as he took care to threaten, but I'd rather have trouble than have men round me who aren't loyal."

He added later: "You wouldn't think it of Elliot, would you? Twenty-five years in the service of the firm, married and a family, getting a good wage, thoroughly decent, conscientious fellow—I tell you, I could have—have cried almost—when I told him to go. . . . *He's* not to blame, I know—it's the power that's got hold of him, that's got hold of Michael as well, and that—but for—for Providence, shall we say?—would have got hold of mother. . . ."

25

She made up her mind to find out things for herself. Peter, she knew, addressed open-air meetings in Rotherhithe on Saturday nights. The following Saturday she dressed plainly, but without any attempt at real disguise, and went down to Rotherhithe. It was nearly half-past eight when she reached the Tunnel entrance. The main streets, crowded with marketers, were ablaze with arc-lights and naphtha-flares, but the place was some distance down a sheltered side-turning, withdrawn alike from the glare and clatter of the highways.

She was just in time to hear Peter begin. There was no missing a word. His voice was as rich and resonant as the lower notes of an organ; it suited the open-air much better than a room. With his first sentence he seemed to cast a spell; the chatter faded into silence, and when she glanced round a few moments after he had begun she saw bewilderedly that she was no longer on the edge of the throng but in the midst of it. She saw the faces behind her, row upon row of them, glistening like pale ghosts in the half-darkness, and all so different, so wildly transfigured, now that they were under his spell. She remembered what Michael had said. "I've seen it light up the faces of men in a crowd when Peter talks to them. . . ." Was it there—in those strange, strained faces that surrounded her on all sides?

Then suddenly she saw it—but not in the faces near her. She saw it before her own eyes, like a sharp flame leaping straight from the soul. Something that he had just said—some word of his that came to her like the sound of a distant footstep on a long and lonely corridor. Gazing ahead over the shoulders of the crowd, she suddenly caught a glimpse of him; he was standing on a small platform, with his huge frame bent slightly forward and his face softly illumined by the glow of an oil-lamp. She felt then, with a passion she had never felt before: He is my father, that man. . . .

As for what he said, it was the most outrageous, indefensible and vitriolic attack she had ever listened to. From his burning words, John (always referred to bitingly as "Sir John") was a tyrant and blood-sucker of deepest iniquity. There was not a virtue that he had, or a vice that he lacked. His good wages—"a bribe held out for souls." His generosity—"a contemptuous scattering of silver, so that while you are all scrambling for it, he can collar the gold." His fairness—"the meanest, dirtiest trick that ever helped a coward to dupe honest men." And so on. . . . The caricature was so false that it was almost absurd. And yet. . . .

26

When she reached Sky Peals, shortly before eleven o'clock, John had not returned. Nan had gone to bed, and Fran had the library to herself while she waited and pondered. She could never stay long in that room without thinking of Peter; it was there she had first met him, and he told her the whole story of his life. And also it was there, before she was born, where the chains of Peter's life had been forged during a single interview.

She realized suddenly the vast failure of his life. With all his powers and abilities he had done nothing but wander aimlessly from one land and one job to another; the canvas of his life was crowded with colour, yet somehow lacking in point and purpose. There had been no guiding principle, no pivot, until lately. And this sudden central motive that had begun at last to dominate, was, she knew, just Hate—a hate for John and for all that John symbolized. Of course it was unfair. Hate was always unfair . . . and yet, when she tried to put herself into Peter's place, and to see things with Peter's eyes . . .

John came back about midnight. He said briskly, as he pulled an easy chair opposite to hers: "Well, Fran, the thing's happened now, as I guessed it would have to. The men are to begin a lightning strike on Monday morning."

"John!—a *strike!* But—why? What for?"

"For the reinstatement of Elliot."

"Well?"

"I'm not going to reinstate Elliot. I'm damned sorry for the man personally, but I'm not going to have him back."

"Well?"

His face and body were absolutely still—clenched, almost. "They'll put down tools with a light heart, I daresay. But they'll be in a different mood when they take them up again."

"*What* do you mean, John?"

"I mean this," he replied, without the least inflexion of voice, "that I'm prepared to have the whole tannery closed down for six months—a year, if necessary. I'm going to *fight* at last, now that I'm driven to it."

She whispered, almost inaudibly: "I believe you wanted it to come to this."

"Frankly, I *have* wanted it, for the last month, at least. Ever since the beginning of the year there's been a dirty,

underhand movement against me. Now that the battle's on the surface, it's a great relief."

He seemed eager to state his case. "Fran, for years, as you know, I've given myself to the service of the firm. I've done what I could, not only to make the firm profitable to us, but to make the lives of the workpeople happy. I've built them houses and baths and rest-rooms; I've given them good wages, pensions, family help; I've let them have everything they could possibly want except this wretched 'liberty,' as some of them choose to call it—this liberty to subsidize treason and put grit deliberately into the machine that works well for them and for me. . . ."

He paused, as if to give her a chance to interpolate, but she did not. He went on fervently: "I've built up this great enterprise on fair and just foundations, and I'll fight to the last to prevent it from being smashed up out of sheer malice. For it *is* malice—the malice of a man who couldn't get what he wanted, and therefore set himself out to ruin and destroy."

He was, she knew, appealing to her for support. But she could not give it him. She felt intellectually helpless, as she always did, after he had stated his case. She saw the ground being cleared for final battle between the two of them—John and Peter. Her husband and her father. . . . She could not take sides with either of them; she dared not; it seemed to her that they were both wrong and both right. She was almost indifferent as to what might happen between them. Only the thought of Michael stirred her to passion, for she saw him drifting aimlessly in the way of the fighters and being ruthlessly trampled on—by either or both of them.

John said finally, with a slight smile: "Sorry to have had to make you a speech. But you heard his, so it's only fair you should listen to mine."

"You——" she gasped. She hardly realized what he meant or could mean.

He nodded good-humouredly. "Exactly. . . . You weren't far away from me in the crowd, only I couldn't—it wouldn't have been wise to—approach you. . . . Damned fine speech, anyway, wasn't it? I wouldn't have missed it for the world. . . ."

27

The tannery strike began quietly and without incident on Monday morning.

About noon John returned to Sky Peals; he did not seem at all worried or depressed; the prospect of a fight was having a tonic effect on him. "The tannery's closed down," he told Fran, "but only forty per cent of the men are out. The rest are loyal, and I'm going to see that they don't lose by their loyalty." He was brisk and businesslike as always, and hummed cheerfully as he walked about the house and gardens.

But she felt very miserable. She leaned over the rail of the terrace in a kind of stupor; it was so difficult to realize that miles away, over those sunny hills, things were happening that could vitally affect her. The whole situation, when she pondered on it, became suddenly hard to comprehend; that Sky Peals, so rich in loveliness and luxury, depended in some queer and mysterious way upon that incredibly ugly building in Bermondsey. That, the normal fact of her life and John's, seemed far more curious than this later, abnormal phase.

She watched John on the lawns talking eagerly to Hayward and Robbins. Business, no doubt, from their attitude of attention; he seemed to be consulting them about some matter that required much gesturing and pointing round about him. . . . She watched him half dazedly; then he came into lunch, after giving Hayward and Robbins final directions. During the

meal he was eager to give her a summary of his conversation with them. He had been discussing plans. (Of course she might have expected him to have plans.) "You see, Fran, a good many of the labourers at the tannery are loyal, and as the place is closed down it isn't wise either to lock them out without wages or to pay them for doing nothing. . . . And, as it happens, I've had a certain scheme in my mind for a long while, but I haven't felt inclined to pay for the extra labour it would require. But now, with twenty or thirty men from the tannery coming up every day, I shall be able to put it into working order almost immediately. Hayward thinks it's a fine idea. The men will come up every morning by charabanc, and go back at night. They'll have free meals here and draw their usual tannery wages. I daresay most of them will regard is as a sort of holiday."

"But what is it that the men are going to do?" she asked.

"It's a biggish job, but they'll be able to make a start, anyhow. . . . Roughly, it amounts to this—I'm going to have the meadows drained and levelled and laid out in sloping lawns as far as the road. Of course the tannery men will only do the rough work—Robbins and his men will have the rest of the job."

She said, very quietly: "Don't you think it will be rather spoiling the meadows?"

"Quite the opposite, I should think. As a matter of fact, I've often thought that the approach to a house like this ought to be less—less ordinary, shall we say?—than a path through a few fields. . . . Of course, I know there's a sort of tradition about them—my grandfather wouldn't even have a roadway built. But I don't want to be a slave to tradition. Of course, if you had any strong objection—or mother—— As a matter of fact, I asked mother, and she told me she didn't mind in the least."

"Neither do I," she answered, fighting back the choking bitterness that assailed her. After all, what did it matter? Her helplessness made her willing, almost eager, to acquiesce; she felt that she must husband all her powers of resistance for the really crucial struggle that was coming. But the meadows . . . the meadows. . . . She felt for them as for living things that she loved and that loved her. Yet to see them destroyed was not so terrible in prospect as to receive John's benignly-bestowed favours.

The whole of the next day the men were in the meadows measuring and calculating. She tried hard to go about her business as if it were not happening. But she could not. And towards twilight, when the men had gone away, she walked across the lawns and into the cool avenues of delight where all that had really ever happened to her had happened. Yes, she felt *that,* absolutely. The meadows lived, and all else was dead. The meadows were kind and understood her; the meadows did not belong to John. And when the moonlight covered them she remembered what Michael had said: "The meadows of the moon are sanctuary." . . .

Michael, and anxiety for him, filled her mind. He was in Bermondsey, involved in some queer way in the fight between two mightier protagonists. He would get hurt, somehow or other; she had a recurrent nightmare in which she always pictured a certain drab alley in Rotherhithe as the scene of a riot; and it was always Michael whom she saw, battered and half-killed, dragging himself along the alley towards her.

All at once, amidst the doomed meadows, she felt life catch fire suddenly within her. The moonlight pressed against her eyes and made a loud humming in her ears; she could not think of anything in the world except Michael. The meadows were his, and she was his, and sanctuary was to be with him anywhere in the world. His sanctuary, as well as hers.

She could endure her own need of him, but his need for her, so clear, so perfectly simple, was like fire running through her . . .

28

For news of what was happening she had to rely entirely on the newspapers and on what John told her. The newspapers were the more informative. Some of them were frankly puzzled by the strike; others were faintly hostile to John. One of them stated John had "dismissed a man for disagreeing with him," and left it to be inferred that such high-handed methods, even when adopted by model employers, would not do for the twentieth century. None of them regarded the strike as worth more than a daily quarter-column on an inside page.

John told her nothing except that the strike was continuing, and that there could be no end except by the men's submission. Peter was the main-spring of the resistance; it was he who was stirring up the men by fiery speeches; it was he also who had given false information to newspaper men. "He's putting up a very clever fight," John grimly admitted, "but his worst enemy, and my best friend, is Time."

She felt that Time was her worst enemy also. After ten days of waiting for something—anything—to happen, the strain of it suddenly became unbearable. And then the idea came to her—to go herself to Bermondsey and visit Michael. It might be unwise, or unsafe, or even treasonous to John; but, at any rate, she would learn something that John would not and could not tell her. She would learn what was happening to Michael amidst the stress and turmoil of the fight.

She went one evening when John was dining out in town. When she got to the Institute it seemed to her first of all that the premises were entirely deserted. There was none of the bustling activity that she had noted on her previous visit. She

walked straight down the central corridor, no one stopping her or even inquiring her business, until she came to the door of Michael's room. There came no answer to her tap, and when she opened the door she saw the room was empty.

She waited, feeling sure that he would come in some time during the evening. The whole building seemed extraordinarily quiet; she wondered if she were really the only person in it. The quietness was strange, sinister almost; it seemed to her the quietness of something that had been left suddenly, abandoned. After a short while sounds came from the streets outside; faint sounds at first, as of distant shouting. And then at last (it must have been over an hour after her arrival) she heard running footsteps in the corridor outside; the door was flung open, and Michael entered.

He hardly saw her, hardly saw anything. It was her constant nightmare come true at last; Michael half-killed in some street affray, Michael hunted down into the remotest corner of the world, and there, in that corner, finding her waiting for him. She saw blood on his face and neck, and his cheeks flushed and streaked with perspiration.

"Fran!" he cried, facing her with wild and blood-shot eyes. "*You?* What—what have you come here for?"

She never answered him. Before she could utter a word he had flung himself at her feet and was crying like a scared child. She could not speak; could only smooth his hair and touch him.

He whispered, pressing his face against her body "You're heaven, Fran. . . . I can hardly believe you're real—here—and now . . . You seem to put your fingers on all my nerves and calm them—instantly. . . . Oh, darling—you *do* belong to me—why don't you?"

She said, strangely calm: "Micky, that expresses it perfectly. I *do* belong to you. Why *don't* I?"

She half-laughed, and then seemed suddenly to realize that something dreadful must have happened. "Micky, you're hurt —Micky, what have they done? Micky——"

"I'm not hurt. This blood—isn't mine. . . . I don't know whose it is. . . . I didn't stay to find out. . . . There's been a row down by the tannery. . . . Oh, God—I can't get it into my mind even yet."

She put her hands on his shoulders and made him look into her eyes. "Just tell me everything," she whispered.

Her words, but more still, some stranger power she held over him, brought him to a sudden calmness. And then he said, quite simply: "I think Peter's dead."

She did not flinch. "Tell me everything, Micky."

He told her, with a kind of eager misery. "Some shed near the tannery caught fire. Just after this row at the tannery gates. And when the shed caught fire—the police—the police took him—took Peter—and said he'd fired it on purpose. . . ." He shouted hoarsely: "A trick—a trick—to get him safely locked away in jail! John's method all over——"

She interrupted: "No, Micky, don't say that. That wouldn't be one of John's methods."

"Wouldn't it? He'd do anything if he were in a losing game. And he *is* in a losing game. By God, he is. And if he thinks the fight's all over because he's got rid of Peter, I'll show him the mistake! I'll carry on the fight. . . . I *will* fight—I'll fight John as I've never fought anybody or anything on earth before——"

"Micky, you aren't telling me——"

"Telling you? Oh . . . They took him—four policemen—all holding on to him—and suddenly he seemed to give a great shake of his arms and body—and then—in a second or so—he was running down the road, and the police were all sprawled on the pavement. . . . They chased him—hunted him

—all along those narrow, winding streets by the waterside. Scores of police—all blowing whistles—hundreds of police after a few minutes—all chasing him. He'd no chance. They closed in on him down a long street that ends up in a parapet facing the river. He'd no chance. . . . And when they all came rushing up with their batons drawn he just turned and climbed the parapet and jumped in.

"Drowned, of course. The tide was running high, and he wasn't a very good swimmer. Besides, I think he wanted to drown—rather than be caught. The tide must have taken him right away downstream—towards Greenwich or Blackwall. Somebody dived in after him, but it wasn't any use. . . . He'd no chance."

She said, after a long pause: "Mickey, that's what I feel about all his life—he'd no chance. . . ."

29

She did not stay with him long after that. She felt dazed, and when the dazedness began to leave her, a numbing horror took its place. She had no idea what she should say to John when she returned to Sky Peals. She had reached the pitch when she could fling everything to fate, when she simply refused to use will-power or prevision. But, as it happened, John had not arrived when she got home; nor did he come in till over an hour afterwards.

As soon as he saw her he said, gravely: "Fran, I've news for you."

"Yes?"

"It—it isn't good news, I'm afraid."

"Tell me."

"That's right. Be calm about it. It's about—this man—Peter—your father. . . ."

"Yes?"

"He's been drowned."

He took her arm, and when she had been silent for a while, continued: "I don't know how far you were fond of him, Fran, but I know that his being your father must have meant something. . . . I'm sorry."

She replied, almost impatiently: "Well?"

"You'd like me to give you details? Or are you too tired to-night? Would you prefer?——"

"Oh, now, *now* . . . please."

"All right."

He paused, and then resumed, with quiet emphasis, and with his arm still linked in hers. "Fran, it's no use mincing words. I'm going to tell you the truth, just as if he were alive. You'd rather, wouldn't you? Well, here's the truth. Peter—I'll call him that now, Peter—tried to set fire to the tannery. This evening—earlier on. He did—actually. It's—it's such a dreadful—a fiendish thing that—I can't—somehow feel any anger for him. I feel beyond anger about it. Fran—just imagine a fire at the tannery—with all those crowded streets surrounding it, and with a following wind. . . . All Bermondsey might have been in flames in half-an-hour. He must have been *mad*—raving mad. Poured gallons of petrol over a shed in the wood yard, and it was a sheer miracle the thing was discovered in time!"

"He *did* that?"

"Caught absolutely in the act. He *was* mad, Fran. He struggled like a madman—he had the strength of ten men in him. Raced down those streets by the river, and then, when he could see the police closing in on him, hurled himself over the edge of the Friary stairs. High tide, or he'd have been buried in the mud. . . . I went in after him, but it took me all my time to save myself, let alone him. The tide was racing."

"You—you tried to rescue him?"

"I went in after him, anyhow. Rather pointless thing to do, as a matter of fact, but I suppose it was a kind of instinct. Pitch dark . . . and the devil of a tide in the Pool. Good job, maybe, that I didn't find him—he might have struggled and dragged me under."

She stared at him with a cool exterior abstraction, wondering at the kind of man he was, to have done such a thing and afterwards to have described it in such a way. She said at last: "Is there no chance that he may have swum ashore lower down the river?"

"Possible, of course, though he'd have to be a pretty good swimmer to do it. But somehow, I don't think he'd want to swim ashore. He'd know what was waiting for him. Arson's a serious business, you know—quite probably a five years' sentence. I don't imagine he'd want to face that. . . . Of course, we're only theorizing. Most likely of all, I think, the tide was too much for him, whether he wanted to get ashore or not."

"John . . ." she looked him steadily in the eyes and whispered: "Are you—are you—*really*—sorry?"

"Frankly, I'd rather know him drowned than see him tried and sentenced as he would have been. He's better dead than years in prison. That's my honest opinion. You asked for it, remember."

She seemed suddenly to realize all that he had been telling her, and all that Michael had told her previously. "Poor old Peter," she whispered, sadly. "He was *old,* though, wasn't he? That doesn't make it so bad. Whatever happened to him, he couldn't have failed any more than he did fail—always. The end doesn't seem any more of a tragedy—perhaps not so much even—as his whole life. . . . Yet if—supposing—it had been Micky——"

John interrupted quickly. "If you're thinking about Michael, you can let yourself feel relieved. For what's happened is the best that *could* have happened for *him*."

"How?"

"In this way. . . . I can tell you now—better than before. It's been extraordinarily hard for me to tell you things up to now—knowing how you've been—connected—with Peter—and with Michael. . . . I've not wanted to worry you. . . . But now it's not so hard. . . . All along, ever since they first of all met, Peter was the master and Michael the slave. The willing slave, maybe, but that doesn't alter the fact. Michael always was like that—he'd go mad over something or somebody and let them lead him into the most outrageous things. . . . Of course, Peter just 'ran' him for all he was worth. But for Peter, the Institute would have fooled about amiably till the money was spent . . . it was Peter who twisted it round to suit his own ends. Michael had vague notions about art; Peter had very definite notions about smashing me. . . . I've known all along that Michael's been under a sort of spell—that's why I haven't been hard on him. I'm expecting now that the spell will break and that the whole rotten unnecessary business will just fizzle out."

It was all so logical and true—as everything that John said. Michael *had* (on his own confession) gone mad over Peter, and Peter, grasping his opportunity, had used Michael for the furtherance of his own plans. The memory of her first surprise visit to the Institute recurred to her; what she had seen then was symbolical—Peter stormily haranguing a room full of adults, while Michael preferred to teach lads and girls to yell the Kreutzer Sonata at the tops of their voices.

All she said to John was: "I'm glad you haven't been hard on Micky. . . ."

30

The next day the newspapers printed columns about the tannery "riot," Peter's arrest, and the subsequent chase that had ended so tragically. They all made a great deal of John's attempt at rescue. John was icy with contempt for the compliments bestowed on him. "That's the way of these newspapers—always looking for a hero. I told one interviewer that my first thought on entering the water was that I'd been a damned fool to do it. . . . But he won't print it, of course."

She did not smile. She felt stung by the power of him, by his power to compel, so strangely and irresistibly, her admiration. And yet, far deeper than admiration, she was conscious of a growing and passionate resentment, not against John personally, but against the whole part he had played in her life. He had had his way always, so surely and effortlessly; he had been so easily, devastatingly *right,* and yet, in some deeper way which she could never explain, she knew that he had been *wrong.*

Peter's death was of course a victory for him. The strike could not last any longer, unless Michael . . . and as soon as she thought of him she saw with piercing clarity the dreadfulness of what might happen. He might try to take up the burden of Peter's fight. It was just the sort of thing he *would* do. And if he did, he would be defeated, inevitably, but—but she could not bear to think of his being defeated. Oh, he must not—*must* not fight. She went to her room and wrote him, with hardly a pause for a word, an eager, pleading letter. She tried to indicate her own position to him (and, incidentally, to herself):

Micky, I'm in an awful muddle. You once said I was narrow-minded because I could only see two sides of a question, but I assure you two are quite enough when they're yours and John's. . . . To be quite frank,

Peter was wrong in his attitude. I know you were very fond of him, and I was also, but that oughtn't to blind us to facts. (Didn't you once say: *"De mortuis nil nisi verum?"*) Peter's attack on John's management of the tannery was really so wrong that it was almost absurd. John always had been a good employer; I don't think any impartial person could dispute that. And sooner or later, in any trouble between workpeople and employers, it's the side that hasn't got a good case that has to give way. . . . Micky, I'm writing this because I don't want you to do what you threatened; I don't want you to continue Peter's fight against John. Because, first of all, you couldn't—you aren't made for fighting. And then, also, even if you tried, you'd be pretty badly beaten, and I should hate to see you being beaten—by John. Micky, keep out of it—let it collapse, as it will do most likely. Stick to your art and music classes, and don't try to do what only Peter could do. . . . I don't want you to be in on the wrong side, and if you fight John, you *will* be on the wrong side.

I'm writing so disjointedly because that's just how I'm thinking. It's curious, but I can see your point of view, and even Peter's, and I can sympathize with them far more than I can with John's, even though he's right. All along, so it seems, John's been doing these marvellously "right things" that have been, from your point of view and from Peter's, and also from mine, just thundering mistakes. . . .

I feel sometimes . . .

31

She did not get any further. John came into the room. Through a mirror she could see him close the door and then approach her. He spoke her name, and then, perceiving that she was writing, went on: "Sorry to interrupt. . . . Can you spare a minute?"

For once his courtesy had no effect; she turned and faced him, and something put it in her mind to reply: "I'm not sure that I can—just at present. I'm writing a letter."

"So I see." He was rather pale, and she noticed that his eyes had almost sunk back into his head. "Well, you've *got* to spare me a minute, anyhow. . . ."

"Then why trouble to ask whether I could or not?"

He did not reply. He walked to the window, looked out, and then walked back again. At last he said, quite calmly, and as if the previous incident were closed and forgotten: "A rather unfortunate thing has happened. Somebody left the newspapers lying about in the library."

"John! And has she——?"

"Yes. . . . Mother saw them."

How swiftly that phase of truculence vanished away now, in the face of this other and deeper matter. . . . The newspapers, full of headlines about Peter, and photographs of him, stirring accounts of his pursuit and probable death. . . . John had warned her, most particularly: "Don't leave any of the papers where mother might get hold of them. . . ." And she had forgotten! It was the bitterest of ironies that in this one matter in which she was so desperately in the wrong, she should have begun by needless and provocative hostility to John.

"Tell me, John. . . ." She threw down her pen and stood up facing him. "Tell me about—Nan. What did she do? Is she—ill?"

He replied: "The sort of attack Meneage told me to expect if—if she had some sudden shock."

She broke down into quiet crying. "Oh, how *could* I have forgotten! It's all my fault—I left them there. I was reading them and I forgot to put them away—it's all my fault."

She wondered if he would be angry with her; she almost hoped he would. But all he did was to put his hands on her shoulders and say: "Can't be helped. We all make mistakes . . . Come and help me with her."

Not a word of reproach. It was like him—so like the intolerable, utmost perfection of him. He went on, guiding her out of the room and along the corridor: "I've 'phoned for Meneage."

Behind her, on the desk in her room, was the letter to Michael. It was never sent. It was never even finished.

32

Everything was so suddenly different. A moment before all her thoughts had been about Michael and the tannery and the strike; now it was all Nan. Nan was in her room; she had been put in bed; but there was no sleep for her, no repose of mind or body. She was *raving*—quietly, sombrely, with a curious tired melancholy. She kept crying out, in gusts of passion: "Oh, Peter, Peter. . . . *Why* did I ever let you go? Peter, we *were* wrong, both of us. . . ." And then, as a variable theme: "The meadows, Peter—oh, the meadows. . . ."

John sat beside her, but she took no notice of him. Nor of Fran. There was no companion for her save the torture of her own remorse.

Meneage came, very spruce and calm; made his examination; gave his directions. "She keeps talking about meadows," he said afterwards. "Do you know what she means? Are there any meadows?"

John replied: "There are—or there were. They're being altered now."

Meneage nodded. "It seems to me that this place—the house and the neighbourhood—remind her of too many things. When she's a little—quieter—it would do her good to be taken right away to some place where she's never been before."

"That shall be done," answered John.

Long after Meneage had gone he sat tirelessly at the bedside, his hand closed over Nan's the whole of the time. Meneage had given a sleeping draught, and towards dusk sleep came; not till then did John move away. It was six o'clock.

"Must get down to the tannery," he told Fran. "Mother

will sleep till I come back. . . . Don't worry. . . ." He smiled and patted her arm.

She murmured something about dinner, and he said: "Oh, I'll ask cook for some sandwiches. I can eat them in the car on the way down. . . . Don't worry about *me*."

She waited hours in the silent room, watching the windows turn from grey to black, and fearing that every chiming from the garden belfry would waken Nan. But still Nan slept.

She had a small meal about seven, and then dozed in front of the fire. She was physically very tired—too tired even to read or finish the letter to Michael.

It was after ten when John returned. He was overjoyed to find Nan still asleep. He carried a chair very quietly across the room and placed it next to Fran's; then he sat down and began to talk in carefully restrained whispers. But before he had finished his first sentence she knew that all her darkest fears were being fulfilled, and that Michael had plunged already into the hopeless vortex of battle against John.

As John described how Michael had tried to prevent the strike from collapsing, and to rally the men round him for a continuance of the struggle, a faint touch of contempt crept into his voice—the first indication, perhaps, that the stress of the day had begun to affect his nerves. "I'm annoyed with him, Fran. It's really too stupid—issuing his silly little schoolboy manifestoes of defiance. . . . He can't speak in public—he hasn't any of the personality necessary for leadership—all he can do is to make a fool and a nuisance of himself."

"And are the men rallying round him?"

"A few are, maybe. Just many enough to make him a nuisance, and few enough to make him a fool. . . . Of course, it can't last. And I'm not going to let it last, either."

Her mind echoed warily: He isn't going to let it last. What does he mean by that? . . . He isn't going to. . . . She forced

herself to waken. "What *are* you going to do?" she whispered, with scared eagerness.

"Whatever occurs to me as the best way of bringing this absurd business to an end. Three-quarters of the men are keen to get back as it is."

"But what will you do?"

"Just what I can."

An idea came to her. "Will you try to send him abroad again?"

"I don't know. I shall try to get him to *do* something. I wish I knew anything that he *could* do."

"And you think he'd be all right abroad?"

"Oh, no—I haven't especially thought of that. I want to be fair to him. . . . Can *you* think of anything?"

33

She could think of Michael laughing and talking to her, and loving her all the time with that curious conflux of all his senses. And she could think of herself answering him, trying to put into words the strange position that was theirs. Trying to tell him that there was something in him rare as gold, some spark of the divine that needed her to make it burn.

And she was so certain of one thing—that if he went abroad she would never see him again. The mere thought of that drove her to instant panic. The idea seemed to stop the beating of her heart; she could not imagine, could not even dare to try to imagine, a world in which she was never to see him again. She felt so surely that he was hers, vitally, that she had a pure and unalienable right to him. She felt even that it would not be immoral to leave John and go to Michael, but that never to see Michael again would be fiendish immorality. . . . .The merest lifting of the curtain on a world without him

made her feel sick, sick as she might have been from a glimpse at some act of obscene cruelty.

The days dragged on. The men were still at work in the meadows, from which she could conclude that the tannery was still closed down. John, as always, told her very little. And Nan's recovery, if recovery it was (they were not absolutely certain even of that) was dreadfully slow.

The strain of it all was making her feel ill herself, and when an invitation came to her to dine one evening with friends in town John urged her to accept. The change, he said, would do her good. . . . But he did not know the temptation he was putting in her way. For almost as soon as the limousine had swung out of the drive into the high road the thought had occurred to her: Why not visit Michael? She dismissed it first of all as a wild impossibility: she could not search through Bermondsey in an evening frock and opera-cloak; still less could she or would she bargain with Martin to keep a secret from John. . . . Impossible—quite impossible. And yet by the time she was being driven through the outer suburbs the impossible had become the possible, even the distinctly worth while. A new confidence and determination had come over her also; she would go to Bermondsey, evening frock notwithstanding; she would cancel her dinner engagement; but she would not ask Martin for any favours. On the contrary, Martin could say and do what he liked. As they reached the eastern outskirts of the City she leaned forward to the tube and said: "Martin, I want you to stop at a telephone box and 'phone the Merivales that I can't come this evening. You needn't give any reason. Say that I'm writing a letter immediately." After he had done this she gave him further orders. "I want you to drive to the Lighthouse Institute in Bermondsey—you know where I mean?" He seemed surprised, even

reluctant to obey her. "Rather rough lot down there," he said, doubtfully. "I don't know whether Sir John would like—"

She interrupted him then by a very calm and sweet: "Sir John would always like you to do as I ask you, Martin."

It was after eight when she reached the drab and squalid corner that was to have been wholly irradiated by that wonderful crimson challenge. She found police on guard at the door, and a small crowd of stragglers who eyed the shining Rolls-Royce with a lurking semi-hostility. One of the policemen came to the door of the car, and when she said that she wanted to see Mr. Michael Savage he seemed perturbed and went back to consult with his colleagues. After a moment he returned and told her that Mr. Savage was in the building and that she could see him if she wished. He added: "There's been a little trouble here to-day, and we're on guard to see there isn't any more. . . . If I were you I'd send your car away and phone for a taxi when you want to leave. This sort of car isn't very safe about here just now."

All this was discussed while she was still in the car. The crowd of curious onlookers increased rapidly, and she had a bewildering gauntlet of scrutiny to run when at last she stepped out on to the pavement, dressed as for a West-End dinner and theatre. Two of the policemen escorted her into the building, but they could not protect her from derisive laughter and jeers. The last thing she said to them, before they left her in the familiar corridor, was: "Tell my chauffeur to wait outside Liverpool Street Station till I come for him."

She walked quickly along the passage right to the end, and opened the door of Michael's room. A great eagerness merely to see his face again possessed her; the seconds between her first tap on the door and her glance into the room seemed a whole wearisome age. But at last—at last—she saw him. He was sitting at a desk that was littered completely with papers, ledg-

ers, and account-books. His face was very pale, and his eyes, when they met hers, shone with a wild and feverish astonishment.

"Fran. . . . You've come again!—Oh, why—why—just when I want you—do you always come?"

He seized her hands with immense eagerness, and then, when he had hold of them, did not seem to know what to do.

"I came because I wanted to, Micky."

He half-smiled. "And does John know?"

"I haven't told him."

"Hasn't he found out?"

"Perhaps he has by now. He certainly will. But I don't care. . . . I don't care what he knows or finds out."

"How splendid—you don't care!—Neither do I."

She pulled her hands away from him and sat down.

"What's been happening here to-day, Micky? Some sort of trouble, eh?"

He laughed as at some uproarious joke which he had only just seen. "Oh yes, I *must* tell you about it!—It's John's victory—that's what happened. John's really complete and tremendous victory—over me and everybody and the world. . . . Calm and bloodless as death. . . . But it's a victory all right."

"Tell me, Micky."

He told her then, with a sudden change to calmness and impassivity, as if the whole matter were somehow outside his concern. John, apparently, had been to the tannery that morning and had actually addressed a meeting of the men outside the tannery gates. "Really, Fran, his pluck amazes me—it's a lovely thing—a poem, almost. . . . He just began to talk to the crowd very quietly and simply about the strike. You know his way—that 'Damn-it-all-I'm-only-a-plain-man-like-yourselves' sort of manner he has. . . . At first the men looked as if they'd kill him if somebody would give them the lead.

But nobody did—*I* didn't even—and why the devil I didn't beats me absolutely. . . . But after five minutes I knew that he was quite safe. And after ten minutes I knew even more—that I hadn't a ghost of a chance left in the world. . . . Oh, he didn't say anything really bad about me, damn him. He just laughed at me—in public—called me his 'young and headstrong brother'—said I was an awfully decent fellow, only no good at business or managing money. Hoped nobody in Bermondsey had entrusted money to me, because I was quite incapable of managing my own, much less anybody else's. Told them also that I hadn't registered under the Friendly Societies Act, so they hadn't any legal redress against me. . . . Result—oh, well, can't you imagine it?—As soon as I got back here there was a crowd waiting to draw out their money from some loan or other—the books are all here. . . . But I'd got no money to pay out with. Tradesmen's bills been pouring in all afternoon—*they've* been given the tip as well, I suppose. Account overdrawn at the bank—bank-manager rang me up to say so. . . . Oh, my God, what a beautiful joke—and so damned clever of him to be able to do it all without hurting my feelings!"

He leaned his face forward into his hands and began laughing or crying, or both together; she could not tell which. And after a pause he continued: "Good Heavens, how was *I* to know about the blasted Friendly Societies Act? Trust John to know all about it, though, and about everything else. . . . Oh, really, it's been most beautifully clever of him—to say a few kind words about me that have smashed me far more than any amount of abuse would have done!"

She said, forcing herself to be calm: "You hadn't any money to pay out with?"

"Not a cent—except what was in my pocket—about ten shillings."

"How much do you need?"

"Oh, God knows. . . . It's all down here in these damned books—or ought to be. Perhaps a hundred—or two hundred —or more than that. I really haven't much of an idea."

"But, Micky, you must have some idea. Haven't you been going over the books? What were you doing when I came in? And what's all this that you've been writing out?" She touched a heap of scribbled manuscript at his elbow.

"Oh, *that*. That's only something I've been doing."

"What?"

"A play, as a matter of fact."

For the moment she felt rather annoyed with him; it was so like him to be writing a play when he ought to have been straightening his accounts.

"A play? . . . I think you ought to realize, Micky, that you're in a serious position and that you'll have to act seriously."

He spoke with sudden fervour. "I know all that. And this play's the most serious thing I've ever done."

"You mean you *have* written it? All of it? Or are you near the beginning of the first act? That's as far as your plays used to get, Micky."

"I'm near the end of the last act." He stirred restlessly. "Oh, don't ask me questions about it. It's no earthly use for any theatre that ever was or will be, and it hasn't a dog's chance of ever being played or published."

"Then why did you write it?"

"Why *does* one write things? What makes one do anything that isn't going to lead instantly to hard cash? . . . And what a question from you, Fran!"

"I didn't mean it like that. I meant—what gave you the idea?"

He answered quietly: "Nothing gave it me. It's been in me

—for years—perhaps ever since I was born. But after Peter's death I was wild—with all sorts of misery—and I just sat here hour after hour and wrote, almost without knowing what I was writing."

"I'd like to read it. May I?"

"Not yet. Not till it's finished. Perhaps not then. . . . It wasn't meant for anybody to read. It was just—somehow—meant for me to write. . . ."

34

They talked on for hours. She told him about Nan, and then they went back to the money question. "I want to help you out of this mess if I can, Micky. I'll send you some money as soon as I can to-morrow morning—I can't tell you how much—I don't know what I can get without John knowing."

His eyes glowed. "Oh, that's fine of you, Fran. Thank God I can push these wretched books away and have done with them."

"But that's just what you can't, Micky. You've got to find out exactly how much is owing and to what people. I'll help you. Just tell me what sort of booking system you've been using. I'm used to accounts, you know—I used to wallow in them when I worked at the tannery office."

The request might have been made in deliberate irony. For there was absolutely no system at all in the various club books, and even if there had been, Michael would not have understood it. The whole business, as she could see after a couple of minutes, was in a chronic muddle from which the most expert accountant in the world could hardly rescue it. The whole thing was pretty nearly hopeless. And all that Michael could say was: "Well, of course, it was the clerk's

job to look after the books. I always thought he was doing it all right."

"Where is the clerk?" she asked.

"Oh, he isn't in Bermondsey now. In fact, I'm not sure where he is. I think he emigrated to Canada a few weeks ago."

"And probably took a good deal of the money with him," she thought but did not say. She struggled through the figures as well as she could, making notes that she thought would be helpful on the morrow. When she had finished she turned to him and, out of very pity for him, touched his hand. "I'm afraid you're in a most awful muddle," she said.

"With the money?"

"With—with everything, it seems to me. Whatever made you undertake a large-sized affair like this?"

His forehead clouded as if he were pondering over the problem for the first time. "I wanted to," he answered, at length. "I'd got hold of that money, and I wanted to do something *real* with it. I had visions—sentimental visions, if you like—about Bermondsey, a Bermondsey made beautiful. Was that absurd of me?"

"The visions weren't absurd, Micky, but——"

"Oh, I know what you're going to say. Visions aren't much use on their own, are they? Then why do they keep on coming to me, luring me on, making a fool of me? Why can't I just go on doing one thing after another, as John does? Fran, I'm at the mercy of things—I want something, and I don't know what it is—but I keep on seeing it—here—there—everywhere. . . ." He gave her a sudden dazzling glance. "I believe," he went on, "that you understand me better than any one else in the world. . . . And perhaps it's *you* I want, and perhaps that's why you keep on coming to me, because you know I want you."

She wanted to say to him instantly—"You can have me, Micky—I'm yours, and I never have been anybody's else's." But

the words would not be uttered; it was as if she were escaping from prison and finding the last of the bars just too strong to break.

She felt that if he touched her, kissed her, everything would be easy, and she would be able to speak. She half-hoped that he would touch her. . . . But he did not. He just, in the end, said to her: "If we were in the meadows now, we should both be so certain of everything."

CHAPTER FIVE

MICHAEL AND FRAN

1

JOHN was in Nan's room when she reached home, and Nan was still asleep. He smiled a welcome, and asked her about the Merivales. She told him immediately: "I didn't go there, John. I changed my mind—I went to see Micky instead."

"At the Institute?"

"Yes." He looked at her dress and she knew what he was thinking. "I told Martin to take me, and I 'phoned the Merivales I couldn't come."

"Oh, yes." He seemed to think the whole affair quite natural. "Well, and how did you find Michael?"

"In a perfectly dreadful muddle. Surrounded by account-books and tradesmen's bills. I tried to help him out with them all, but the whole business seemed to be in complete chaos."

He nodded. "He needed practical ability. That's what I said all along. Just think of it—he's gone through twelve thousand in six months. Where's it all gone? What's he done with it? Is Bermondsey any better?"

His sudden frontal attack startled her. She said, quietly: "It's a poor defence, I know, John, but he meant to do well. And you've smashed him—*I* think, at any rate—by an underhand sort of blow."

"How do you mean—underhand?"

"You practically told everybody he couldn't pay his way. Like setting a pack of hounds on to him. . . . I call *that* underhand."

"The fairest blow is that which gets the fight over quickly. What would have been the good of letting him carry on a few weeks longer and heap up a few more hundreds of debts that he couldn't possibly pay? I did the very best thing in getting the whole business finished with"

"Yes . . . you always do the very best thing."

"I always *try* to. . . . Now that he's beaten, let's hope for peace."

The strange thing was that she was talking and listening to him so calmly, so unprotestingly, while inside she felt on fire against him and all his methods.

"What sort of peace?"

"Well, the men are going back to-morrow morning."

"Oh, *that*. . . . But what about Micky?"

And he answered: "I don't know what he'll do, or can do. I shall be glad to help him, of course. . . . You can rely on me to deal with him fairly and generously. . . ."

2

She could not sleep that night. She rose very early, got together all the money she could find (a trifle over a hundred pounds) and sent it with one of the under-gardeners by the first train to town. Towards afternoon the man returned with a note for her from Michael. It was characteristically scribbled, and very difficult to read, but she made it out as follows:

DEAR OLD FRAN,—

It's so good of you to send me the money, and of course it helps me a lot, though I haven't the faintest idea whether it'll be enough. Really,

things are in an awful mess, and it's rather dreadful for some of the poor people round here who've put money into the club—quite small sums, you know, but they're a lot to them. That's what troubles me most—I *do* want to pay everybody back somehow or other. I feel awfully tired out —I finished the play after you'd gone, and then I sat up all night with those books. . . . Oh, Lord, what a muddle—John's done me in all right, just as he does everybody in, but somehow now, when I think it all over calmly, I don't feel any ill-will about it. After Peter died I felt I could kill John with my own hands, but I don't feel like that now. I really don't know what I feel like, except that I'd do anything, give anything, to have everybody paid out properly. It seems so awful to have come here meaning to help people and to end by swindling them out of their money. I seem to have made an awful hash of my life so far. Perhaps I'll do better if I try again—differently. But dreams die hard—especially when they're such dreams as I'd had. . . .

She felt something give way in her mind, some barrier before a tide that swept her to panic. He was giving in to John; he felt hopeless; he was miserable. Her ache for him swelled into physical agony; she had never wanted him so much because she knew that he had never wanted her so much. She could endure her own desire for him, but his for her was like that of a trapped animal for freedom. . . .

She groped her way to her room and flung herself down on a settee and prayed—to whatever God or gods might be listening—for Michael. He must not give way to John. They had done that, both of them, so often in the past; but now neither of them must. All the misery of her own life, of Michael's, of Peter's, of Nan's, had been caused by giving way where there ought to have been no giving way.

3

During the afternoon John rang her up from the tannery. "I've been seeing Meneage," he said. "He thinks mother's quite fit to stand a journey, and that a complete change of

environment would be the best possible thing for her. . . . So I've taken a place he recommended . . . at St. Leonards. Everything very decent and comfortable. . . . I want you to arrange for mother to leave Sky Peals this evening at seven o'clock—by car, of course. It's rather a rush, I know, but I think it's best to seize the opportunity when she's in a cheerful mood, and she seemed so much better this morning. . . ."

"You'll be going with her, I suppose?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't. I'm expecting to have some business at home that may keep me late. . . . I want you to go with her in the car, and I'll follow later by train. Can you arrange it?"

"Oh, yes, if you wish."

"Thanks ever so much. . . . I'm having rather a busy day, but I'll try to be home in good time before you leave. Have dinner at six. . . . Good-bye. See you soon."

Like him, of course. She was quite accustomed to these brisk colloquies over the telephone, and to his sudden plans that needed her own domestic staffwork to make them smooth-running. She was occupied most of the time until six o'clock in preparing for her own and Nan's departure. Nan, when she learned of the arrangement, was childishly enthusiastic; she was obviously delighted at the prospect of moving away from Sky Peals.

Fran herself was less pleased. She was as happy at Sky Peals as she was anywhere, and, instinctively, she did not want to be very far away from Michael. . . . But St. Leonards, of course, was not far; the distance was greater, but it was possible to get from the south coast to Bermondsey as quickly as from Patchley. . . . And the change of scene would do Nan so much good; she was certain of that.

But she was sorry that John's business arrangements would prevent him from going down with Nan that evening. John

knew just how to deal with her, especially if anything happened on the road and she got excited or difficult. . . .

John came home a few minutes before six. There was a look of quiet triumph on his face; his walk across the library to greet her was almost jaunty. She guessed so many of the reasons. "You've had a successful day?" she queried; and he replied:

"At the tannery? Oh yes. . . . All the men are back."

"What a triumph for you!"

He made no comment, but went on to outline his St. Leonards scheme. He told her all about the house, and where it was situated, and what sort of a place St. Leonards was, and why it would just suit Nan—all despite the fact that he had never been to St. Leonards. "I've been 'phoning instructions all day," he said, "so you'll find everything ready for you when you get there to-night. That's why I thought it wiser not to make the journey earlier: it gives them plenty of time to prepare everything."

Almost throughout the meal his talk was of St. Leonards, and it was only quite casually, when the servants had gone away, that he remarked: "It was generous of you to try to help Michael with your money."

She wondered how he knew, but she was almost too startled to ask.

He continued: "Unfortunately it has been more or less a free gift to the worst scoundrels in South London."

"What—what do you mean?"

"Simply this. I went to see Michael this morning. I could hardly get near him—the whole place was packed with mob. He'd been industriously doling out your money for over two hours, and he'd just about got near the end of it. I tell you, it was almost funny—all the rogues and vagabonds of the district fighting and shoving to present their little paper receipts

—most of them not even skilful forgeries, either. Some of the fellows had the infernal impudence to come up twice. . . . Think of that! Oh, really, it *was* funny. I should estimate that rather less than five per cent of your money went to the right people."

It seemed to her that he was talking about something that hardly mattered. "And Micky?" she said, forcing herself to keep calm. "What about him?"

"Oh, he looked dead tired, as if he'd been up all night. I got a few policemen and managed to clear the crowd out of the place——"

"But what—what did he say—what did he do?"

"Precious little. . . . To tell you the truth, I felt rather sorry for him. Anyhow, we had a good old friendly heart-to-heart talk. I think he's rather learned his lesson. . . . And he seemed to agree with me that he's played the fool rather badly."

She said then: "You're trying to send him away again, aren't you?"

"I'm trying, as I've always tried, to do what's best for him. I told him that if he wished I'd straighten out the affairs of the Institute as well as I could, and also—again if he wished—I'd find him a decent job somewhere."

"Abroad?"

"Anywhere."

"Again!" she echoed, with dull misery.

He went on, briskly: "The pity of it is he's so aimless—he does so many things a little and nothing very much. . . . What do you think he's been doing most of the last few days? You'd think he'd have been trying to clear up the muddle, wouldn't you? But he hasn't—he's just let things slide. All he's done is to write some play or other which he tells me isn't any earthly good."

"He said that?"

"Yes. I told him I didn't mind looking at it, anyhow. In fact I just picked it up and put it in my pocket. He didn't seem to mind—didn't seem to care a damn for anything."

"What sort of a play is it?"

"Haven't had time to look at it yet."

"You've got it here?"

"I sent it to a typing agency—I couldn't wade through yards of manuscript. You know what Michael's handwriting's like."

She was silent for a while, and at last he added: "If you're interested I'm sure Michael would lend it to you. All I know about it is the title, which seemed to me the sort of title Michael *would* choose. . . . 'The Meadows of the Moon' . . ."

She seemed struggling against something inside herself; at last she said slowly: "John . . . never mind the play. . . . It's the other business that needs to be settled. And—John—it's not fair. You know how keen he is that none of the Institute people shall lose any money. And you—you practically bribe him—bribe him to go away—by promising you'll pay them."

"But I had intended to settle up the club accounts in any case."

"Micky doesn't know that. I daresay he thinks it's conditional. He's bound to think that."

"Not at all. I've made no bargain with him. I've just offered to do certain things if he'd like me to. He said he'd come up here to-night if he decided to accept my help."

She felt her mind suddenly sicken.

"He's coming up here to-night?"

"If he wants me to help him—yes."

"And you expect him to come?"

"Frankly, I do. I know when a man's beaten. And I know

also when he's sorry. Michael's both." He added, after a pause: "You needn't worry. I shan't be hard on him."

4

Michael beaten and sorry! She felt that she could not bear him to be either, and that John's serene clemency was the most terrible thing in the world.

She escaped from him somehow (to leave John was always rather like an escape) and went up to her room. The maid had packed suit-cases; the car was due in less than half-an-hour. There were so many things to be thought of, but all were tremendously overshadowed by the possibility, almost the probability, that Michael would come to Sky Peals that night. No doubt the interview with Michael was the business that John feared might keep him late. . . . She knew exactly what would happen on Michael's arrival; a cordial welcome from John, a drink perhaps, and then, afterwards, a quiet chat in John's study with John arguing perfectly, calmly, with that superb undercurrent of friendliness that bewitched where it could not coerce. She knew, she felt intuitively, that Michael could not withstand John, that he would be bowled over absolutely, and would end by agreeing to everything that John suggested. The interview might last an hour or more, and after it John would emerge from the study with the unruffled air of a surgeon after a successful operation.

And all that time, she herself would be miles away, whirling southward in the car with Nan. And last of all, perhaps, late that night in some strange room of a strange town, John would arrive and tell the truth in some easy casual sentence that would just *kill* her. . . . "Oh, by the way, Fran, Michael's decided to accept a job I've offered him. In Borneo. . . . He sails next Monday."

Borneo . . . or Saskatchewan . . . or Mozambique . . . or some God-forsaken plate at the other side of the world.

No. . . . Never. . . . She made up her mind suddenly and finally. She would not, could not, endure all that torture over again. She cried to herself, with calm vehemence: He *shan't* go away again. . . . And yet, if he came to Sky Peals that night, that was what would almost certainly happen. . . . Then he shan't even come here to-night—she cried in answer, but she knew that if she were to stop him she would have to meet him and tell him everything. Then she must meet him. *Must,* this time.

5

On the way downstairs she met Nan. Nan was dressed for the journey, waiting eagerly for the car, happy in the half-petulant excitable manner of a child on the eve of a holiday. As soon as she saw Fran she cried out: "You're coming with us, too, are you, Fran? Is Martin ready yet?"

It was difficult to talk to her. You had to put your remarks into a certain key, as it were, or else they meant nothing; or, alternatively, they might mean too much, might become totally weighed down by the load of inner meaning that she put upon them.

Fran answered: "No, I'm afraid I'm not—not to-night. I've —I've got to go somewhere else."

Something stirred in Nan's mind; you could almost see it stir. She said quietly and strangely: "You're going to see Michael, aren't you?"

They stood still, facing each other; both very calm, but with calmness of vastly different kinds. What did Nan mean? What did she know or guess? Nothing, of course; it was absurd even to wonder. It was just one of her odd remarks that were usually pointless, but on this occasion chanced to be

right. Nan was not, could not be, clairvoyant enough to guess. . . . And yet. . . .

Fran did not know what to say or do. Then came the sound of the car crunching round the corner of the drive, and that seemed to force an answer. She let herself move and speak just as some inward involuntary instinct urged her. She went up to Nan and kissed her; then she said, smiling: "I'll see you soon, Nan. Have a good holiday. . . . Yes, I'm going to see Micky. How funny you guessing."

That was all. Nan was a child again as she replied: "There's Martin, Fran. The car's ready. Oh, I am glad I'm leaving this awful place. . . . Tell John I'm ready when you go down."

Many a time afterwards she pondered over that curious short meeting. How much had Nan known, or felt, or guessed? She could never come to a decision.

6

She would catch the 7.50 from Patchley and be in Bermondsey by soon after nine. She could have used one of the cars, but that would have involved the risk of meeting John. She would have to explain things to him some time, of course, but it could all be done later, either in person or by letter. Nan would probably tell him the simple outline; she would say "Fran said she was going to see Michael," and perhaps John would understand.

There was a light in his study as she passed it on the way out. He was working, as usual; feeling, no doubt, the rich satisfaction of having surmounted at last all the difficulties that had been harassing him. She could picture him at his desk by the window, intent on sheaves of papers, and perhaps occasionally glancing out upon the darkening panorama of his possessions.

In the gathering twilight that panorama impressed even her. A pang of doubt assailed her as she descended the old familiar steps from the terrace to the lawns; it was as if the whole secret might of the place were bidding her stop and think carefully. But she could not think carefully. A fierce and devitalizing panic overwhelmed her; she was obsessed with the thought of Micky helpless in the power of John.

But there was Nan to think of also. Who would take Nan down to St. Leonards? John would have to; or perhaps Martin could take her alone: or perhaps one of the maids. . . . This much was certain; that if she couldn't go, or if the departure were considerably delayed, Nan would be disappointed in just that infinite, sickened way in which a child is disappointed.

She did not care about John's difficulties, but Nan's were worth troubling over. And perhaps, after promising to do something for her, she ought not to break her word without warning.

At last, in the icy calm that comes at the absolute zenith of desperation, she made herself go back into the house and tap at John's door. She would tell him exactly what she intended to do. Just that . . . and afterwards she would be free.

7

As she had guessed, he was working. He had a methodical heap of letters at his elbow, the result of his secretary's full day's labour; and he was going through them carefully, signing those that appeared correct. As soon as she entered he put down his pen, swung round on his revolving armchair, and smiled. His smile was immensely cordial, and she might have expected it to be.

"Ready, eh? Mother ready also? Martin's brought the car

round. You'll have a good ride down. I've 'phoned the people at the other end—they'll have things put right for you."

Before she could reply or say anything at all he went on: "Mother's heaps better, don't you think? Splendid, isn't it? It really does look as if our troubles were going to have a happy ending, doesn't it? . . . I hope so. After all, money isn't everything."

"I have never been tempted to think it was," she answered rather coldly.

"Neither have I, and least of all now—after what's been happening at the tannery."

"You mean your victory?"

He planted his fist firmly on the desk in front of him. "No, *not* my victory. That's not the way I look at it. It has been a victory, perhaps, but I don't want it to be *my* victory. I want it to be a victory for fairness, for reason, for good-fellowship between me and the men who work for me. And that's what I'm going to make it. . . . Look at this heap of papers. This is the draft of a scheme for helping the very men who've been on strike against me. Cases of distress, you know—large families, a few debts, and so on. . . . I shall be up half the night making plans to help those fellows. And why? Because I've got ideals, just as Michael has. Only Michael can't tell me what his are, whereas I could lecture for an hour on what mine are. First and foremost, a prosperous tannery, with all the workpeople in it contented and free from worries."

"That's different from the way you talked when the strike began."

"Of course it is. Be merciless when you're fighting and merciful when you've won. It's a sound maxim.'

"It simply means that you make your victory all the greater by knowing how to use it. And the way to use it—*your* way to use it—is to be kind and generous and pacific to people

who aren't clever enough to suspect that you're only doing it for your own ends."

"Well—supposing that were so (which I by no means admit)—would you rather I did everything for the moral luxury of feeling myself a philanthropist?"

"I can't argue, John," she answered, dully.

He smiled. "Sorry—I thought you were in the mood. You rather began it, though, didn't you?"

"Did I? Anyhow, it doesn't matter. . . . I came here—to tell you—something. . . ." She summoned up all her reserves of courage and added, firmly: "I can't take Nan to St. Leonards to-night. I'm sorry, but . . . I can't. . . . I'm going to go away—to—to Micky."

She faced him steadfastly, refusing to let her eyes flinch. But his were quite calm. He even smiled again. "That's rather a hasty change of plan, surely? Does mother know?"

"I told her. . . . I thought one of the maids might go down with her in the car. You're following later on, aren't you?"

"Yes . . . but you know that Michael will probably be coming up here this evening?"

She answered quietly: "Yes. I want to reach him first, if I can, and prevent him from coming."

"Indeed?" He seemed faintly surprised. "Well, anyhow, if you're not accompanying mother I'd better 'phone down to the housekeeper's room and ask Betty if she can go. Mother likes Betty, doesn't she?"

"I—I think so." Oh, why was he so perfectly, so exasperatingly imperturbable? She waited, almost stupefied, while he rang through and gave the necessary instructions. Had he not understood her meaning, or was it part of his game to pretend not to understand?

"So you don't want Michael to have a little heart-to-heart talk with me?" he resumed cheerfully. "Why not, I wonder?

I think Michael himself will feel very much more settled after what I have to say to him."

"Settled? *Settled?*" Her voice rose suddenly into passion. "And how will you *settle* him? You'll talk to him, if you can, till he feels sorry for himself. Sorry! . . . And what has he to be sorry to *you* for? He always used to tell me that you could make him *do* what you wanted, but you could never make him think or feel anything. . . . He was safe then. But now, somehow or other, you seem to have got hold of him just as you got hold of everything and everybody— Oh, I can't bear him to be sorry—I can't let him be broken by you—why can't you let him alone?"

He said quietly: "Fran, I don't know why you are so troubled. My intention is to treat Michael very kindly and generously indeed."

"Your kindness and your generosity are the most crushing things on earth, John."

"Have *you* found them so?"

She looked away from him out of the window across the dark landscape. "I—I think I have."

"It is a pity. . . . I have tried to do my best."

"Oh, I know you have. You've been right—marvellously right. You were right about Micky's books at Oxford—you were right about Peter and Nan—you've been right about the strike. . . . Oh, how right you've been and how wrong Micky's been, and yet . . ." her voice thrilled with a strange low-toned intensity—"and yet I love his wrong more than I love your right. Oh, John, why are you so calm and so strong?"

He left his chair and came towards her. "I don't know why," he answered. "I don't know even *if*. I only know this —that if I thought I had used strength to bully or oppress, I would be bitterly ashamed. . . ."

Some sense of his power made her cry out agonizingly: "Oh,

you're not letting me say what I came to say. . . . I came to say. . . ."

"It doesn't matter what you came to say, Fran. You have nothing in the world to worry about. Not even this interview of mine with Michael. If you would like to see him to-night, go down to Bermondsey by all means. You might travel down with mother as far as town. . . . And if Michael comes here while you're away, I'll promise to send him straight back to you. Does that remove your worries?"

"Oh, John—let me go—let me go. . . ."

8

He let her go. She walked out of the house and over the meadows to the road. A great misery and a great eagerness were in her heart. It seemed to her in the midst of the meadows that the miracle had been accomplished, that John and Sky Peals had yielded up their power over her, not without a struggle indeed, but with less final hurt than she had expected. The first sensation of freedom was buoyant, intoxicating, and beyond it all was the ecstasy of the future, of seeing and helping Micky.

She hoped she would meet him on the way to the station. Twice, during the walk through the almost dark meadows, now woefully littered with the paraphernalia of John's draining and levelling scheme, she thought she saw him approaching her out of the shadows; and all her body, mind, and soul braced themselves for the shock of the encounter. Yet when she saw that it was not he, she was not disheartened, but rather spurred on to a keener pitch of anticipation.

Why had John married her? The question forced itself upon her afresh. Had he "just planned" something with her, worked out some cold scheme of the future of which she was

to be an integral and necessary feature? She could not believe that there was any passion in him, except the calm passion of work and ambition. He treated her with the same calm kindliness that he showed towards the least of his office-boys at the tannery.

It was half-past nine when she dismissed the taxi at the corner of the street where the Institute had had its adventurous career. A slight drizzle of rain was falling, and the yellow lamplight shone on pavements just beginning to glisten. Outside the garish, crimson-painted entrance were still a couple of policemen. "Can I see Mr. Michael Savage?" she asked, and it was then that she began to fear. She was sure, from their looks, that something was wrong.

One of the constables answered: "I'm afraid you can't ma'am."

"He's gone out, you mean?"

"He's not here, anyhow."

His companion, however, seemed disposed to be more communicative. "The fact is, ma'am," he joined in, "there's been a bit of trouble here this afternoon, and Mr. Savage got hurt. . . . Are you any relation of his?"

"Hurt?" she echoed. Her mind seemed to crumple under the shock. *"Hurt!* . . . Oh yes, yes . . . I'm a relation. . . . I'm his—his—" she had actually to think and ponder what she was to him—"his sister-in-law."

"Then maybe you'd like to visit him. They've took him to the Royal Southern Hospital in the Lower Road. Get a tram at the corner—it's about five minutes' journey."

9

She waited for a tram at the corner. She did not think of a cab; it was as if she were incapable for the time being of doing

anything except obey the simple instructions given her. The Royal Southern Hospital in the Lower Road. . . . A tram at the corner. . . . Five minutes' journey . . . that was all she remembered. A moment before, she had been so curiously happy, thinking of Michael and what she would say to him when they met; now she was plunged into despair. How quickly everything could happen! The fall was hardly yet agony, but a dazed and groping bewilderment.

The tram-journey seemed endless, and when at last she was told to alight the rain was falling in slanting swaths. Somebody pointed out a direction to her, and she walked blindly across swirling gutters and rain-washed pavements.

The porter at the hospital lodge did not know who Michael was till he had consulted a chart. He telephoned an enquiry and then told her to wait. "You can't see him yet," he said. "They're examining him at present."

"Is he—is he *badly hurt*—can you tell me *that?*"

"That's what they're trying to find out just now," he answered, unconsolingly.

That time of waiting—barely twenty minutes in all—was by far the most terrible in her life. But it gave her the chance to readjust herself after the cataclysm, to consider where she was and what she must do. And she knew, of course, that the central fact was unaltered, by this or by any other conceivable happening; she belonged to Michael, and she must help him. Perhaps more than ever, now.

10

"Only five minutes," said the ward-sister, as she pulled away the screen and placed a chair by the side of the bed. Then she left them together.

His head was so completely bandaged that she could only

see his eyes. But her first thought was— Thank God they haven't hurt his eyes!—For they gave her instantly that eager, dazzling stare that was exactly the same as it had always been —a breaking-through, as it were, of some fierce inward light of the soul.

"He can't talk to you," the sister had said, "but you can talk to him, if you don't excite him."

But he *could* talk to her, with his eyes. She began by speaking his name—"Micky—" and then she could get no further. But he answered her, even so soon, by a sharp gleam of his eyes. She said, after a pause: "You said—Micky—I always come—when—when you need me. . . . And I've come again —now. . . ." The gleam sharpened then till it almost broke into flame.

She asked him if he were badly hurt or in much pain, and she saw his eyes wrinkle as though he were laughing at her and himself.

They smiled at everything together. That was really all they could do. When some other occupant of the ward muttered in his sleep, she smiled at him, and he smiled back at her—with his eyes. And when the wind blew open one of the windows and a shower of raindrops fell on to the bed, she smiled at that, and again he smiled back at her. They smiled even when they heard footsteps approaching them, and a sudden movement of the screen. "That's the sister," she said. "She's come to tell me that my time's up and I've got to go. But I'll come again soon—to-morrow—as early as they'll let me."

It *was* the sister. But she was not coming to separate them. She was bringing someone with her. John. . . .

11

"They 'phoned me almost as soon as you'd gone," he said, addressing her, "but I had to see mother safely away. . . ." Then he turned to Michael. "Well—you seem to have had a pretty rough time, eh?"

She could have killed him for saying that. It jarred on all her nerves. "A pretty rough time"—as if it were some minor semi-humorous accident. But it didn't seem to jar on Michael. He gave John (and she was immediately half-humbled, half-furious to see it) the same amused wrinkle of the eyes that he had given her.

It was all John after that. He took supreme command of the situation; he smiled, he joked, he laughed—once or twice he laughed so loudly that she thought the sister would come to them and remonstrate. But when at last the sister did come, it was not to remonstrate; she smiled and chatted to John and seemed to recognize in him a dominating being like herself.

"Now remember, Michael," said John, just before they were compelled to leave him. "Remember you've absolutely nothing to worry about. *I'm* taking charge of the Institute, and I'm going to make it my business to see that every penny is paid out to the right people. And I'll also settle any little bills there may be. So mind, now—no worrying!"

Fran said nothing at all. The presence of John drove all the words out of her mind. But she smiled at Michael, and he smiled back with his eyes, first of all at her, and then, no less cordially, at John.

Outside the ward the sister told them that Michael's injuries, though severe, were not so serious as had been feared at first. "But he'll have to be kept quiet," she said, warningly, "and he mustn't see too many visitors."

John laughed. "I shall be too busy to do more than look in occasionally," he said. He turned to Fran then and added: "But you'd better see him as often as you can—you're quiet enough."

Then he enquired when Michael would be fit to be moved away into a nursing-home.

12

They waited beneath the portico of the hospital entrance while somebody sent for a taxi.

"What happened, John? Do you know?" she asked.

"To Michael?"

"Yes."

"Oh, the ruffians got restive because there wasn't any more money to dole out. Your hundred this morning just whetted their appetite. . . . Then some brave spirits stormed the building and chased Michael with sticks and india-rubber truncheons. . . . Still it might have been worse—knives and razors, for instance. As it is, he'll probably be all right in a few weeks."

The taxi drew up then, and they did not speak again till they were sitting together in the dark interior. Reaction, after the stress of the day, had settled upon her; she was relieved that Michael was not so seriously hurt as he might have been, but she was also strangely, profoundly melancholy. It seemed to her almost as if fate itself had entered the lists on John's side.

"You were right," said John, after a pause. "Everything *does* seem to be happening to-day. By the way, I told the driver to take us to Liverpool Street. Does that suit you? I'm going on to St. Leonards by the last train; I can't disappoint mother. And you, I thought, could take the train back to Patchley. I told them to have a car at the station."

She nodded.

At Liverpool Street he shook hands with her and seemed especially cheerful. "See Michael as often as you can. *I* shall also, but it won't probably be at your times. Be good to him; he's had rather a thin time, in some ways. . . . And come down to St. Leonards whenever you feel like it. Do just what you want—and don't worry."

13

She went back to Sky Peals.

Most of that night she lay awake. She was troubled, perplexed; worried about Michael's physical hurts, but far more deeply concerned about something else that had obviously happened to him. And that was that he had begun to like John. To *like* him. She had seen already between the two of them something that had hurt like a knife against her heart; a look, a quick glance that seemed to indicate an understanding aloof from and beyond her. Was John playing an even cleverer game than she had imagined? Was the Savage fairness, fairer now than ever, luring Michael because it could no longer lure her?

She pondered till she drove herself to desperation. She was free, at last, but free only to perceive that it was not her freedom that mattered, but Michael's. The axis of responsibility had shifted from her to him. And the deepest misery of all was to feel: When *he* was the rebel, it was I who would not join him; whereas now, when I would do anything, go anywhere, for him. . . .

He was in danger, more than ever now. He was falling into John's power. He was in need of her just as much, but less aware of it. John was not making him *do* things, as had happened in the past; the influence was striking deeper, more subtly; John was making him *like* him. And she knew what

happened as soon as Michael liked people. He trusted them—absolutely.

14

She came down rather late the fellowing morning, and during breakfast Martin, who had just arrived back from St. Leonards with the car, brought her a note from John.

My Dear Fran,

I have just reached the end of my journey and am pleased to find that mother stood the ride very well and is now sleeping. I have decided to live here for the next week or two; I shall go up to the tannery every week-day, so that if you wish to ask me anything you can ring me up during tannery hours. I shall be at the Institute most of to-morrow, I daresay, trying to straighten things up. I shall put Merton in charge—he's rather a smart fellow. I have also made arrangements that as soon as Michael is fit for the transfer he is to be removed to our own Cottage Hospital at Crole. That will be much pleasanter for him, and also much more convenient for you when you visit him. I have given Robbins full instructions about the continuance of the work in the old meadows, and Hayward is coming down to St. Leonards to-morrow night, so you need not have anything to worry you. . . .

The whole letter was so very like him—the reeking essence of him, in fact. "I have done this"—"I have arranged this"—"I am going to do that. . . ." And all so sweetly, so reasonably.

15

She reached the hospital about eleven in the morning. The ward-sister was polite, almost effusive. "Sir John Savage called here about nine," she announced. "He stayed talking for quite a long while."

Michael's eyes were closed when she reached him. She thought at first that he must be asleep. But the sister came up and spoke to him, and then he opened his eyes and saw Fran.

"I've come to see how you are," she said, desperate, unable to think of anything else.

His eyes tried to indicate that he was better.

The conversation could not but be one-sided.

She said: "John's been to see you, then?"

"He's arranged for you to go to Crole as soon as you're fit."

"It will be nice when you're so near to Sky Peals."

"John's going to settle up everything at the Institute."

"Nan's gone down to St. Leonards for a holiday. John's taken a house there. I haven't seen it yet. John's staying there for the time being, and coming up to the tannery every day."

"John. . . . John. . . ." It was all John, even though she herself was responsible for all that was said.

. . . . . .

She was jealous of John in a curious way in which she could never have been jealous of a woman. She felt that John's power over Michael was something with which she could not compete, something foreign and aloof. It was proprietary, almost fatherly. And though something in Michael still rebelled against it instinctively, she felt that the rebellion was becoming weaker.

Meanwhile John succeeded where even she could not have believed he would She learned that out of the almost impossible chaos of the Institute accounts he had managed to evolve some kind of rough-and-ready system by which, in the main, the right people got the right money. She learned also that he had announced his intention of continuing the life of the Institute himself. "With proper organization and management," he had said, "it could be made to do a vast deal of good." And, of course, the "proper management" meant simply *his* management.

It was not many days before Michael was fit to be moved to Crole. The Cottage Hospital at Crole was very beautiful. It

stood near the summit of a thickly-wooded hill, and its red-bricked terraces overlooked the village and the countryside. Moreover, like most other things in Crole, it was John's. He had built it and paid for it, and it was he, in the main, who kept it going. There was his foundation-stone near the main entrance, and his enlarged photograph in the reception-hall, and his name over the principal ward.

Michael occupied one of the small private rooms that faced the terrace. Nothing was lacking for his convenience and luxury; everything had been perfectly arranged—by John.

Michael could talk now. And to Fran those daily visits to him at Crole were always associated in her mind with his talk and laughter, and the spring showers and sunshine, and the scents of the gardens underneath the terraces. And John, of course. . . . It was impossible, at Crole, at any rate, to escape from John. The smooth, clean efficiency of the place was his entirely; the white tiles and scrubbed floors and rounded corners were his sign-manual.

She had long talks with Michael on the sunlit terrace. The nurse used to bring them tea in the sunshine, and the doctor met them often with a cheery, "Hello—getting along famously, eh?" Everything was full of a winsome, childlike delight. It was more like a nursery than a hospital.

16

She knew that he loved her as he had always done. It was not that he said so, but rather that when they were together they both felt so overwhelmingly free—free to say and to do and to be absolutely what they liked. Yet the bonds that linked them were stronger even than themselves: theirs was somehow the curious miracle of a bondage that was perfect freedom.

They often talked about John. It was almost as if they were trying to make a case out against him and, in the end, were giving up the task as hopeless. Michael even defended him. And Fran said, in an attempt to put her utmost feelings into words: "It isn't that I dislike him, Micky. And it certainly isn't that I've any complaint to make against him. He's always been perfectly kind to me—always. But he's so outrageously right about everything—that's what I can't endure. I can so easily forgive you for being wrong, but there are times when I can't forgive John for being right."

"That means," said Michael, simply, "that you just love me and don't love him. That's all."

"That's everything. . . . And this business at St. Leonards—of course he's gone there to be with Nan. . . . And yet—*would* he have been there—all the time—but for you and me? Has he stayed there just to make things easier for us?"

"Decent of him if he has."

"But he *hasn't* made things easier. It's always harder, whenever he tries to—to make things easier—to be, as he calls it, *fair*. . . . If he played the conventional husband and forbade me to have anything to do with you, it would all be so easy—I should just laugh at him and walk out of the house. But he doesn't do things like that. He just keeps himself very carefully right, and then waits for other people to put themselves in wrong. It's his method."

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well, in the main he's pretty decent—that's all I bother about. . . . Do you remember years ago—before I went abroad—I once told you that I hated John so much that I almost respected him?"

"Yes I remember."

He smiled at her rather nervously. "Well, *now*—it's as if—as if I—I respect him so much that I almost—*love* him. . . ."

He added haltingly: "When I think of Peter—and how Peter made me hate John—made me hate him so much that as soon as Peter went away I *had* to laugh at myself—I couldn't help it—I felt—'Oh, damn it all, John can't be so bad as Peter makes out.' . . . Poor old Peter. I hated John to please him, but I could never hate as much as he hated. . . . You and I mustn't get Peter's complaint, Fran."

She looked at him with eyes that suddenly burned. "You're right, Micky. You're righter than I am."

He smiled again. "When you're right, I'm wrong. When you're wrong, I'm right. That's co-operation, isn't it?"

17

Yet she could not fight down her strange jealousy of John. And one afternoon when she was with Michael on the terrace the postman brought him a letter addressed, as she could see at a glance, in John's handwriting. He put it in his pocket unopened, but she said, with eagerness: "Why don't you read it, Micky? *I* don't mind."

He laughed. "Because my time's far more precious with you. And besides, it's only from John."

His frankness in telling her that relieved her. "John?" she echoed gently.

"Yes, and it's bound to be the usual John letter—all about where he's been and what he's done and how much it's cost."

"But I'd rather you read it, all the same."

"Oh, all right, then." He opened the envelope with an amused gesture, and glanced through the small, carefully-written enclosure. For half a minute he looked completely and devastatedly bored. Then all at once, with a leaping light in his eyes, he jumped to his feet, crying out: "Oh, Fran—I say, really—Fran—what do you think he's done now?"

He stared at her for a moment in speechless stupefaction. She could see that the news, whatever it was, was obviously good news, yet her mind was not relieved of its load of sickening doubt.

"Micky" she whispered in a scared voice, "tell me—*what* has he done?"

"Don't be alarmed—it's rather curious—in fact, it's unbelievable—I never dreamed. . . ."

"But you haven't told me yet."

"It's that play I wrote. John's found somebody who'll take it."

Just for the instant she had a sensation of altogether ignoble jealousy—jealousy that John should have been able to do this for Michael, that it should be in his power to commandeer such spectacular success. "John told me you'd lent him your play," she said quietly, and he seemed to divine something of the feeling behind her words, for he replied:

"Really, I couldn't help lending it him, Fran. He came round to the Institute and saw it—picked it up in one of his 'Hello—what's this?' moods. . . . I thought the quickest way to put him off would be to tell him the truth. And then he asked me to lend it him."

"So did I, by the way."

"Oh, but you're different. I knew *he* wouldn't understand a word of it."

"Well?" she said, glancing down at the letter. "And *has* he understood a word of it?"

"Of course he hasn't. As if he *could*. . . . Besides, he doesn't say anything about the play itself—the letter's all about what he's going to do about it, and what I've got to do, and—oh, damn it all—I believe the fellow's got the whole thing planned out already. . . . What a man! And he's coming up here to-morrow to talk things over with me."

She laughed with him then. "Micky," she whispered, seizing his hand with a gesture that was nearly pathetic. "I really *am* glad. . . . I am—oh, yes, I *am*. . . . You're going to be such a success now that John's got hold of you."

18

The future was dark again. As she motored back to Sky Peals after leaving Michael, it seemed to her as if John were fate itself, relentless and unvanquishable.

She guessed that he would choose the morning for his interview with Michael, so that she need not alter her usual afternoon visit. Michael would tell her then all the arrangements that had been made.

She did not particularly want to meet John himself. But it so happened that she did. She was driving along the sunny main street of Crole the next afternoon, on her way up to the hospital, when she saw John stepping out of the post-office. He saw her instantly, and made it impossible for her to drive on, even if she had wished to. He gave her a most cordial greeting.

"Hullo, Fran. . . . Going up to the hospital? That's good—you can give me a lift, then."

She smiled back rather embarrassedly, and said: "Haven't you seen Micky yet?"

"Not yet. My car broke down on the way to town this morning. That's why I had to come up here by train. Rather lucky meeting you. We can go and see Michael together."

"But you want to talk business with him, don't you?"

"Yes, but the business isn't private." He jumped into the car and banged the door. "Drive along, and tell me how you're getting on."

"Oh, I'm all right. How's Nan?"

"She's fine. . . . The sea air's wonderful. Don't I look well?"

She half-glanced at him. "You certainly do."

"That's the sea air. Perhaps it would do Michael good to have a week or two with us when he's fit to leave the hospital. He's doing very well, isn't he?"

"Yes. . . . Oh, yes. . . . What about this play?"

"What about it?"

"Can't you tell me something about it?"

He laughed "Well, it seems rather wonderful that he's actually done something at last, after all his aimless pottering about, doesn't it? I assure you, it pleases me immensely."

"What—the play?"

"Oh, I haven't read that. Really, you know, I haven't had the time, and besides, I'm no judge at all of such things. But I sent it to a fellow I know who runs several theatres, and he seems pretty keen about it. Wants to put it on, in fact, subject to certain arrangements."

"What sort of play is it?"

"There again I can't answer you. I haven't the faintest idea, except that Bischoffer—that's the fellow who runs the theatres—told me it wouldn't probably be a popular success, and that therefore he couldn't put it on unless I backed it financially. . . . So I backed it financially."

"Without reading it? That was rather incautious of you, surely."

"Oh, no. I sent copies to half-a-dozen experts and paid them five guineas apiece for an impartial opinion. Four out of six were favourable, and one even used the word 'genius.' So I reckon myself to be backing a winner."

"Genius isn't a winner, John."

"Perhaps it will be—with me behind it. . . . You wait. Now that I've found something that Michael *can* do, I'm going to back him up for all I'm worth."

Something in her mind suddenly sickened; she said, as she brought the car to a standstill in the hospital courtyard: "I won't come in with you, John. I'm really very busy, and I can see Micky any other time. . . . You'll probably find him on the terrace. Goodbye."

"But surely——"

"No, really, I mean it. I should be bored by all your business talk. You'll do much better by having him on your own."

She smiled and waved a hand and drove off. As soon as she was round the nearest corner of the lane she stopped the car by the roadside. She felt afraid even to drive, until she had rested and thought things out.

This curious play business had complicated everything. She was afraid of it—afraid of it—whether it failed or succeeded. It seemed to her that whatever John did, she must always be afraid of him, and that whatever Michael did she must always be afraid *for* him. She had been afraid when John's aim had been to crush Michael at the Institute; and now, when his aim was to make Michael a roaring, howling success, she was just as afraid of that. She felt she wanted to cry out to John: "Oh, leave him alone—don't do *anything* to him! Why *can't* you leave him alone?"

Two incidents that happened relieved her mind somewhat. The first was when Michael refused John's invitation to St. Leonards. "It's awfully good of him," he told her, "but I'd much rather finish my cure here, where I can see you every day. And if John wants to talk business, Crole's not far for him to come. . . . D'you know, the really splendid thing about John is that everything *is* business to him—a play, or an illness, or a mistake that's been made—anything—it all gives him a chance of planning and arranging, which he loves. I don't think I could stand it if he really knew anything about the play itself."

Later on, however, John forced himself to read the play in manuscript and wrote a letter in which he said:

> I can't say it altogether appeals to me. It's too queer—too uncanny. But then, remember, I'm no judge of plays.

That was the second incident that gave her relief.

She wanted to read the play herself, but Michael would not let her. "As you haven't read it so far," he said, "it would be rather fun if you didn't read it at all. Then when you're in the box with me on the first night it will all come as a perfect shock to you."

He was soon well enough to leave the hospital, but he did not go to St. Leonards, even when John repeated his invitation. He did not even go to Bermondsey. He took a room at the Lion Inn, Patchley, and spent most of the time at or near Sky Peals. And Fran had never known him with such strange and deep intimacy as during those eager weeks. He was a child in his excitement, in his occasional moods of fear and self-incredulity, and, most of all, in his entire forgetfulness of the past. Bermondsey—the Institute—Peter—all that was as if it had been wiped out of his life.

They wandered together everywhere just as they had done in the old days, through all the sunlit and happy villages, and far beyond the hedgeless miles of John's domain into the countryside that was still beautiful and unscientific. Michael seemed no older to her than he had been before he went abroad; even his face and eyes seemed wiped clean of all the mistakes that he had made. He still drove a car with temperamental absurdity; he still forgot the steering-wheel when he wished to point out something to her.

"I'm happy," he told her. "I'm perfectly—wonderfully happy. . . . But after the play——"

"Yes?"

"Wait," he cried, restlessly. "Wait till then. Maybe you'll understand."

He loved her—he even made love to her, in a sort of way, with transient, childlike ecstasy, moving with the desire of the moment and never thinking of the future. He always spoke affectionately of John. In the evenings, when they had been out most of the day, there would usually be a trunk-call from St. Leonards. "Sir John would like to speak to Mr. Michael on the 'phone. . . ." The words became almost a formula, as also Michael's boyish answer: "All right, Manning. Tell him to wait a minute." (The idea of telling Sir John Savage to wait a minute!) And then: "Sorry, Fran, but I'll try and choke him off as soon as I can." He would leave her on the terrace, or by the piano, while he went to the telephone in the hall; and she would hear his cheerful: "Hello, John—wanting me again? Yes, you're pretty certain to find me here if you ring me up this time in the evening. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Oh, well, you just do what you like—or what Bischoffer likes—settle it between you. . . . I wrote the thing because I felt like it, not to make money or fame or all that sort of stuff. That's *your* job, and you can jolly well do it yourself. . . . See? . . . Oh, I don't mind making a speech if you tell me what to say—though I'll probably be as nervous as hell . . . but you'll have to make it up for me. . . . Fact is, John, you're making yourself a damned nuisance, but then you always do. . . ." Laughter.

And then, when he returned to the library: "That theatre business again, Fran. I believe John wants to make his fortune out of that play of mine. . . . Oh, he's a great fellow, but he isn't—somehow—in our world. There's nothing he has that we want or can take away from him. There's nothing that anybody has that we want. We want—things that nobody has ever had before."

19

His attitude towards his own play was completely odd. He would not, as it were, have anything to do with it. He even told John over the 'phone: "You pinched that play. You walked right into my room and just collared it. I didn't write it for an audience. If I'd had an audience in mind, it would all have been quite different."

He refused to attend the earlier rehearsals, although John tried to persuade him. He refused likewise to compose a chatty little summary of his life and career for publication in the press. "If you want it done, you do it," he said to John. "That is, if you know enough about my life and career."

Then at last he yielded to John's importunity and agreed to attend one of the final rehearsals. He went in a scoffing mood; he was certain he would be absolutely bored. "Everything that John does is so *John's,* and John's things always bore me." Fran wanted to go with him to the rehearsal, but he obstinately objected; his whole attitude, so full of whims and objections, puzzled her, till she reflected that it was most likely a matter of nerves.

She arranged to have tea with him after the rehearsal in an old-fashioned and quiet hotel in Jermyn Street. She quite expected that his comments would be forcible, in one way or another; but she was not in the least prepared for what happened. He almost staggered into the hotel, sat down next to her without a word, smiled, and then suddenly leaned forward with his head sunk into his hands. "Don't worry about me," he said, sharply. "I'm all right."

She ordered tea. She was curious, but not exactly perturbed. Michael *was* like that, sometimes. After a while she said: "Well, Micky, what did you think of it?"

"Think of it? Oh my God, what *did* I think of it?"

"Micky . . . was it very awful?"

"Awful?" He looked up with staring eyes. *"Awful?* It wasn't awful at all. . . . Fran, it was *great. Immense.* . . . Oh, I never guessed. . . And it all frightens me so—I didn't want it—I don't know what to do with it!"

"But you're glad, Micky, all the same."

. "Yes. . . . Yes . . . I'm glad." He looked at her eagerly. "John's *marvellous.* He's making it go without knowing what it is. And I could never make it go, because I *do* know what it is, and it frightens me. . . . After it was over he came up to me and said: 'Well, pretty fair, eh? Wants toning up in places, that's all.' *That's all. . . ."*

He went on, more steadily: "I think I'd like a whisky, if you don't mind. I'm feeling just a little faint."

He had one, and then, with a cup of strong tea, went on to tell her further news. "John took me up into the theatre office. Seems to treat the place as if he owned it. . . . Showed me what he called his Publicity Campaign. Going to boom me. Paragraphs in the papers. Photographs. All about what I did in Bermondsey. Beneficent social work. All about Peter —all about how I made money out of oil. . . . All going to be raked up. . . . Damned great scheme to make me a success. . . ."

Walking along Piccadilly shortly afterwards he suddenly fainted, and would have fallen into the roadway had not she held him. Passers-by carried him into a neighbouring shop, where he soon revived. But she insisted on taking him straightway to Welbeck Street, to see Meneage.

He was highly-strung, and his nerves had been upset by the strain of the Institute crisis. That was, in effect, all that Meneage could say. There was nothing organically the matter with him. But he wanted looking after. . . .

He laughed when she told him what Meneage had said

And he laughed again when she said: "That's *my* job, Micky—looking after you."

They went back to the hotel for dinner, and in the middle of it John came in. He was in his usual calm hurry. "Heard about your mishap, Michael. Quite a coincidence—man in the shop knew you by sight and 'phoned me up. So did Meneage—about an hour ago. Nothing serious, he says. . . . Must keep well, you know; you're an important man now. . . . Damned fine piece of publicity, too—to faint in Piccadilly. . . ."

They wondered what he meant. They knew when they left the hotel. For the newsboys were hurrying round with final editions, and on many of their placards were the words: "Dramatist Collapses in Street."

The idea was in both their minds, but they did not care to mention it. Fran bought a paper. . . . There was a front-page column, with a photograph, about Mr. Michael Savage, "whose play, *Meadows of the Moon,* is to be produced next Thursday at the Imperial. . . ."

Michael, looking over her shoulder, clutched her arm sharply. "John . . ." he said, in a hoarse whisper. That was all. It was enough for her to read his feelings. She answered him quietly, almost curtly:

"Oh, never mind John. . . ."

20

There was worse to follow during the week. Gossip paragraphs such as:

Mr. Michael Savage, whose play . . . etc., is the brother of Sir John Savage, of "Savage" boot fame. During the recent strike at the Savage tannery, the former sided with the men, but this has not been allowed to interfere with the close friendship that exists between the two brothers. . . .

Or:

Mr. Michael Savage is a man of versatile attainments and varied experiences. He has been, amongst other things, a waiter, a bar-tender, a cinema pianist, a newspaper reporter, a social worker in the slums, and the leader of a strike in his brother's factory. After all this, he has now written a play, etc.

Fran wanted Michael to ignore it all; she would have liked him to refuse to look at the newspapers, to adopt his earlier attitude of carelessness and indifference. But he did just the opposite. He devoured all the newspapers he could find; he seemed feverishly eager not to miss a word of what was being printed about him. "I can't help it," he told her. "It fascinates me—and frightens me at the same time. To think that John can *do* all this, somehow or other—can pull all these strings. . . . It's all contemptible enough, in itself, and yet somehow the whole thing's just too big to be contemptible. . . . You can't—you daren't—despise a man who can do all this. . . . Oh, he's *great*. He suddenly decides to make a success of me, and all at once I get caught up in the breath of a whirlwind. It's a terrifying experience. . . . I don't care a tiny damn about his sort of success, but the experience—it's almost worth having. . . ."

21

Thursday came. Fran and Michael went out early, motored all morning, and had a cosy lunch in a cosy inn-parlour. They were tired afterwards, tired by wind and sunlight; and in the middle afternoon they smoked contemplative cigarettes on a grassy bank by the roadside. The sun was very hot, and the sky dappled with white clouds, and all about them was a movement and a humming, as of the earth stirring beneath them. Michael's eyes were quivering like blades; he was eager, restless, hypnotised by the evening to come. But Fran was different; never had she felt so calm, so rich with the utmost pre-

monition of peace. Michael talked on, endlessly, brilliantly, almost ridiculously; she hardly answered him, except to say: "Micky, you mustn't get so excited or you'll be ill to-night."

"I'm not excited, Fran. I'm calm—like the water waiting to fall over Niagara."

She put her hand to his forehead and she felt, as soon as she touched him, that it was in her power to soothe and to cool, and to give him what no one else in the world could give. She said, in a whisper: "It would do you a lot of good to sleep, Micky. You haven't been sleeping well lately, have you?"

She knew he hadn't. He had told her of wild dreams he had had—dreams full of crowds and sticks and fighting and Peter and the tannery. . . .

"Sleep for half an hour, Micky," she said. "Then we'll drive home for tea."

"I couldn't sleep——"

She put her arm round him and made him lie with his tumbled hair against her breast. "Micky, you can. You must. . . . I'm wanting you to."

He looked up at her then, and the sharpness of his eyes dissolved into a deeper glow that was like a cool hand laid on both of them. He closed his eyes and slept. . . . She stayed near him, wakeful, watching, half-stooping towards him and feeling something of herself mingling almost with his flesh and blood. It was all so clean and clear—what *must* happen.

22

The evening came nearer.

In the sunlit room at Sky Peals she chose a delicate evening frock of brown and gold. She wondered why—and then she remembered that Michael had so often talked of the little brown dress that she had worn when they were children to-

gether. Was *that* why? If so, it was a very sentimental reason. But she shrugged her shoulders and told herself: "Oh, I must please him to-night. . . ."

And outside, in the corridor, he met her. He looked more boyish than ever in a dress-suit, which, for all its perfection of fit, he wore awkwardly, as if it annoyed him. But as soon as he saw her he smiled, and give her her utmost reward. "Fran, you look lovely in brown. . . . You *are* a brown girl—brown all over—like the low notes of a 'cello. . . ."

(One of his odd remarks that were beyond all argument.)

He led her shyly to the end of the corridor, where the stained glass split the sunlight into cubes and cones of colour. "I'm feeling like a boy that's got to recite a school speech to-day," he said.

"That's just what you're looking, too, Micky. How old are you? Twenty-five? You look about sixteen—especially when you don't brush your hair. Oh, you must brush your hair. You can't possibly appear in a stage-box like that."

"Well, I can't help it. My hair won't lie down."

"Oh, but it must. Where's some oil?"

"Plenty in the garage. Martin——"

"Don't be silly. Let's find some in John's room."

She was treating him as if she were a mother and he a boy in his teens. Somehow that was easiest, calmest. She made him sit in front of the mirror in John's bedroom while she carefully drenched his head with oil and tried to coax the hair into some semblance of responsibility. There were small bookshelves on either side of the mirror, and while she was diligently occupied with his hair, he read out to her some of the titles.

"Listen, Fran. . . . Isn't this just like John? . . . *Pigs and Pig-Breeding. . . . Stock Exchange Highest and Lowest Prices.*

. . . *How to Make Farming Pay*. . . . *Hides and Leather Annual*. . . . Oh, and a novel—*The Murder on the Sand-Hills*. . . ."

He looked over his shoulder and gave her a curious smile. "We can't help liking our John, can we?" he said.

Something touched her then, some beauty of his soul that was his gift to her as surely as she had her gift for him. And she stooped to his face, lured far beyond passion, and kissed his lips so very, very gently.

23

In the car at last, driving swiftly townwards through the long shadows of the evening, he talked chiefly of John. "Hasn't John been decent, Fran? He thinks of everything—even of lending us Martin and the car for to-night. . . . I know he's been decent to you, but to *me*—think of the way he's treated *me!* I really have been rather a maniac at times, haven't I? And it isn't that John comes up to you and makes a great show of forgiving. He just—in a sort of way—wipes things out, and when he's wiped them out you feel he never thinks of them again—never *could* think of them. . . .

"And this play. . . . D'you know what I like most of all? That he's not doing it to please me, but because it's business—because he hopes he'll make money out of it. . . . Business is like an art with him. . . . It's got a technique. . . . It's—almost—beautiful. . . .

"And his way of knowing instantly—always—just what to say. That's an art, if you like, as swift and lovely as a Chopin prelude. . . . You watch him to-night—he'll be a king among them, knowing just what to do, what to say, where to look—and I'll feel like a miserable little worm, scared out of my life by the words I'd dared to write."

She grew almost indignant at that. "You may be nervous, Micky, but you oughtn't to feel like that."

"Oughtn't I?" He turned towards her with shining eyes. "Well, if I do, I shall just —*touch* you—somehow—your hand or your arm—nobody will see. There's something in you, Fran —something even in your body—that gives me power. Did you know that? I've felt it—often."

She smiled at him, and deliberately, as she smiled, touched him.

24

They reached the theatre about eight o'clock, and went first of all behind the scenes. John was there—spruce, calm, superbly active; and Bischoffer also, less spruce, less calm, less superbly anything. Bischoffer spared a minute and took them all to his room and offered drinks. Then somebody called him away and he left them. Then somebody shouted something to John, and he left them. Everything was scurry and bustle and eager, nervous uncertainty—everything except John.

Michael said, as he poured himself a second whiskey: "I can't believe all this is really happening. . . . If I dared to think about it I should run down the hill to the Embankment and throw myself over the edge. It's amazing . . . that somehow *I* should be the cause of all this commotion." He added, as an afterthought. "But then I'm *not* the cause of it. It's John—John. . . ."

At half-past eight the theatre was well-filled, but not absolutely full. John joined them in the box and pointed out various people who had already arrived. "There's McGregor of the *Tribune* in the second row of the stalls, and Burke of the *Evening Wire* . . . and there's Lord Portslade—he's on my board, so I sent him tickets." It seemed, indeed, that the stalls

were occupied very largely by people to whom John had sent tickets. . . .

John talked. "Everything's going beautifully. Not a hitch anywhere . . . Bischoffer's very hopeful.

"Stormy-looking night outside—did you notice it? Just begun to rain, too.

"Oh, by the way, mother wishes you best of luck. She's improved wonderfully by the sea. . . . Would like to have brought her here to-night, but of course the excitement would never do for her.

"Feeling nervous? You've no need to be—all you've got to do is to sit tight and watch. . . ."

They did not answer him, nor did he expect answers. They looked at him and smiled, and then they looked at each other and smiled. And then John got into a sudden quiet rage with his chair. "Fancy putting a stupid little chair like this in a five-guinea box! Why can't there be cushioned arm-chairs? I must mention it to Bischoffer afterwards. Now if *I* owned a theatre——"

Somehow the incident of the chair amused them both immensely. "You'd run your theatre like a tannery," said Michael, laughing.

And John countered promptly: " I would. Why not?"

There might have been a pretty argument but for the slow, almost sinister, rise of the curtain.

25

It was a strange play altogether. Anyone could have understood the commercial manager's unwillingness to bank on it. It was that most dangerous of all things in a theatre—a fantasy which required a certain mood in the audience before it could be comprehended, much less appreciated. And for the first

twenty minutes of the first act, Fran wondered if that mood had been achieved.

But to her personally the whole thing was so definitely and absorbingly Michael that she gave up any attempt to judge abstractly. It was full of things that made her smile gently, or that filled her eyes with calm tears; a hundred things in it made her remember John's old friendly gibe: "Sort of idea you *would* have, Michael." The whole play, from first to last, was packed with the sort of ideas Micky *would* have.

There was not a great deal of cheering after the first act, The audience seemed for the most part interested, but rather puzzled. The newspaper critics in the bar were quite as puzzled as the rest, only it was to some extent their business not to seem so. "Quite promising," said McGregor of the *Tribune,* "and a pretty dialogue in places." And Burke, of the *Evening Wire,* interposed loftily: "Ibsen, of course . . . with a dash of *Milestones.* Rather an anachronism really, you know, putting the *Doll's House* right back into the forties."

During the interval John disappeared behind the scenes, leaving Fran and Michael in the box together. They hardly spoke. Once Fran looked up and was about to say something, but Michael interrupted her with: "Fran, don't tell me what you think of it—*please* don't. Wait till it's all over, and then tell me. . . ."

. . . . . .

The second act, though rather short, was far better; indeed to her, watching and listening almost as in a trance, it seemed hardly to have begun when it ended. She had lost all thought of the audience now; she had even forgotten Micky beside her. It seemed to her that the real Micky was on the stage, entrancing her by an astonishingly beautiful and intimate revelation of himself. The fall of the curtain on this second act came to

her like a rough awakening from a dream, and the applause, though still rather feeble, hurt her till she realized what it signified.

. . . . . .

"By Synge out of Barrie," called Burke, succinctly, calling for a double whiskey in the bar.

And McGregor said: "Seems to me the most perfect rubbish I've ever seen. . . ." He stared round him, as if waiting for some comment, and then added, rather uneasily: "Well, what are you fellows going to say about it, anyway. Like to have *some* idea, you know. . . ."

. . . . . .

John brought Bischoffer into the box. "Never before," said Bischoffer, "have I not known at the end of the second act whether a piece was going to be a success or a failure. . . . The audience seems interested, anyway. But you just can't be certain. . . ." He smiled at Michael. "How do *you* like it? Is it as you intended?"

Michael answered, with a sort of weary puzzlement: "I don't know. . . . I think it is. . . . Perhaps. . . ."

"The gallery's quiet," said Fran. "And that's the danger spot most often, isn't it?"

John suddenly laughed "Oh, yes, the gallery's quiet enough. It's packed with tannery people. Gave 'em free tickets. . . . They'll cheer all right at the end."

Bischoffer said softly: "Savage, you're one sort of genius, and your brother's another."

Then the bell rang and the curtain rose on Act III.

. . . . . .

There was no doubt that this was the best act of all. It was verbally the most brilliant, as well as psychologically the most satisfying. There was one moment of extraordinary pathos

which, played with surpassing beauty, brought the house to that tense and willing hush that is always so much more eloquent than applause. To Fran it was all of it haunted by an aching and intolerable loveliness; she felt its beauty like a spear-point, driven almost to the pitch of torture. And when the last word was uttered and the curtain fell, she sat back in her chair and stared dazedly into space; she felt that something had happened to her, that she had seen and heard some wonderful secret revelation. But she did not feel that the play had been a good one. To her it had been such a personal, intimate thing; she could not imagine or even guess at the impression it might have made on anyone else. . . .

. . . . . .

"Wells, of course," murmured Burke. "Oh, most decidedly Wells. The airship, you know . . . and psycho-analysis. . . ."

"Piffle, anyhow," retorted McGregor defiantly. "I'm going to pitch into it. Pretentious nonsense—with a dash of blasphemy and sex-eroticism. . . . Whoosh. . . . You wait till you see to-morrow's *Tribune.*"

A youngish fellow interposed: "I'm not so sure it is piffle, McGregor. It's certainly either piffle or genius, but I'm not sure which."

"Then you're damned lucky to be on a Sunday paper, my lad, for you've got three days whole to find out which way the wind's blowing."

And Burke soliloquized, half-sadly: "Here and there I seem to find traces of Maeterlinck. . . ."

The audience gave vent to its varied emotions. At first there were casual, determined cheers, and undercurrents of disapproval that took the form of isolated hisses. After a few seconds the cheering increased in volume; so also did the disapproval. Everybody, it would seem, either liked or disliked

the play intensely. On the whole, despite the *claque* of tannery supporters in the gallery, the reception could not be called otherwise than mixed.

But John, as usual, had made up his mind. "It's a success," he cried, seizing Michael's hand, and his attitude was: "If I say its a success, then it is a success." He added: "Get ready for 'em, Michael. They'll be calling for you in a minute."

Michael did not move or speak. He seemed, indeed, in some heavy coma, with his bright eyes fixed on the fallen curtain, and nothing of him hearing or seeing John. It was only when Fran touched him that he stirred; then at last he looked round dazedly, as one waking from an absorbing dream.

"Come on," cried John, briskly. "They're calling for you already."

He whispered: "No, no . . . they're hissing. I can hear them. . . ."

"Nonsense, man. They're cheering you hoarse. Come on and give them your speech."

"But—but what will I have to do?"

"Go on to the stage and say what I told you to say."

"Oh. . . ." He seemed to be overwhelmed by a sudden wave of despair. "Oh, I couldn't. . . . I've forgotten it all . . . I've forgotten every word of it."

"Well, come on then, anyhow, and I'll see you through it myself. I'll manage it if only you'll come with me."

Fran gave his wrist a sharp pressure, adding: "*Do* go, Micky. You'll be all right—with John."

He gave her that old dazzling smile of his and stumbled out of his chair.

It seemed to her, after they had gone, an empty age before the curtain parted and she saw the two of them appear behind the footlights—John first, leading Michael by the arm. As soon as she saw them she remembered Michael's words to

her that afternoon: "You watch him to-night—he'll be a king among them, knowing just what to do, what to say, where to look . . . and I'll feel like a miserable little worm, scared out of my life by the words I've dared to write. . . ."

Yet he did not look quite like that. He looked, as a matter of fact, exactly like a shy schoolboy, with the most extraordinary dazzling eyes that ever threw out their eternal paradox of fear and fearlessness. And his hair—he must have ruffled it with his hand—for it stood up stiffly on his head, very defiantly erect, making him look more like a schoolboy than ever. And John might have been the schoolmaster.

The commotion in the audience ceased gradually and then John began. As soon as he had uttered his first sentence she knew that everything would be all right. He was calm, commanding, and amazingly confident. He was also thoroughly enjoying himself. "Ladies and gentlemen . . . I have been told that it is very easy to write a play, but extremely difficult to get one accepted for production in a theatre. Now, my brother . . ."

(Was it deliberate artifice that made his voice quiver on that phrase "my brother"?)

"My brother wrote this play—in fact, I might tell you in confidence that writing plays is the only thing in the world he can do properly—he can't make a speech, for example, and he certainly can't sell boots. . . . (Much laughter.) Anyhow, as I was saying, my brother wrote this play, whereas I got it accepted, which—according to what I've been told—is much the harder job of the two. Perhaps, at any rate, it gives me the right to be here on this stage this evening to thank you all. . . . etc. . . . etc. . . ."

. . . . . .

Oh, perfect—*perfect,* John— (her heart cried) —perfect, as everything else that you do—an art, as Micky said, as lovely as a Chopin prelude. . . . And yet. . . .

She thought of Micky then; she looked down at him, saw him smiling bewilderedly at the audience; she felt: Oh, Micky, Micky—what *are* they doing to you down there?

26

The theatre was emptying when John came back into the box. "Well, Fran, not so bad, eh? Bischoffer isn't certain yet whether the thing's been a howling failure or a doubtful success. But *I* know what its *going* to be. You wait. . . . By the way, Michael's very tired. I told him you'd go back with him to Sky Peals. I have to stay behind here for a while—not a long while, I hope. . . . I've arranged for a meal for the three of us at home, if you and Michael don't mind waiting till I come. Martin will take you. . . . Ah, here's Michael."

He came to them with a vague and melancholy smile, and John, nodding cheerfully, left him with her.

27

Under the night of stars John's latest and most luxurious limousine drew them across the countryside. The wind had dropped and there was a great calm in the air, a calm rich with the smell of night and the rain-soaked earth. Till they were far beyond the outer suburbs Michael spoke hardly a word; he was nervous, excited; he smoked cigarette after cigarette and lolled restlessly amongst the cushions. Fran let the time pass in silence. Somehow, instinctively, she knew that time and her own watchfulness were helping him.

Earlier on she had said, tentatively: "It's all been a great

success, Micky." And he had replied, curtly: "Oh, that's John's business, the success part of it."

And that was all until the journey was more than half over. Some sleeping village was flashing by—Crole, most likely; a few lights sparkled into the night, and then yielded again into the long cool vistas of starlight. Over towards Sky Peals a small moon arched above the horizon.

He said then: "For *his* sake, Fran—for John's sake—I hope the thing's his sort of success. But for myself. . . ." He turned to her swiftly, with eyes suddenly aflame. "Fran, I haven't asked you yet, have I? What did you think of it all?"

"The play?"

"Yes."

She paused for a moment, and then answered quietly: "What was it that John always used to say? 'Sort of idea you *would* have.' Do you remember? Well, that's the play."

"You liked it?"

"Far more than that. I *felt* it."

He came close to her and touched her hand. "Fran—I can't bear all this any longer. . . . I want you and I know you want me. . . . What on earth can hold us back?"

She whispered: "Nothing."

28

It was the moment for which, so it seemed to her, the whole world had been waiting. He moved toward her restlessly. "Want isn't the word. Need isn't the word. Oh, there *isn't* a word. All the play's been really a tremendous haggle over that word—that word doesn't really exist. . . ." He seemed to be wrestling with a difficulty that still baffled him. "Somehow, just *wanting* you was never enough. I've always wanted you. But that didn't give me any right to you. . . . But now I feel

it's all gone far beyond that—it isn't only I who want you, but something else, beyond you and beyond me, that wants us both. *Do* you understand?"

"Yes."

"Will you leave John and come with me?"

Her eyes sharpened. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes . . . yes. . . ."

"Then I will."

29

The whole thing had happened in an incredibly short minute. At last—at last—he realized his need of her. . . . She felt that if he had said one word more or one word less the thing would have been less perfect. She leaned towards him and ruffled his hair with her cool fingers. "Micky . . . Micky . . . Don't talk about it any more. It's all settled . . . *now.*"

It was she, of course, who had to plan the details. It was hopeless to expect Michael to plan anything. She wanted a clear day, she said, for making arrangements; she would be ready, therefore, by the following evening. She would meet him by the bookstall at Victoria Station and she would bring a passport. All this she arranged with calm deliberation that surprised herself.

"And John?" said Michael.

"I shall tell him—frankly—before I go." But the thought of John managed to disturb her calmness. She laughed a little hysterically and went on: "Oh, Micky, your absurd hair!—It looked really silly when you came on the stage with John. . . . Struwwelpeter hair . . . like a schoolboy's after a fight. And you standing there next to John. . . . Oh, wasn't John *splendid?*"

. . . . . .

But the thought of John left her again, and she was in a calm exquisite dream. She was satisfied; Micky not only needed her but knew that he needed her. After all his eager folly he had seen something clearly, definitely; he had asked her to go away with him. She was overwhelmingly pleased; it was really the most terrific compliment, to be wanted like that. Nobody had ever wanted her like that before. *John?* It was absurd to think of; John would never have been so weak, so human. John would never have the desire to run away with his own wife; let alone with anyone else's. John's life was the tannery, and the farms, and an everlasting scheming, planning. . . .

And yet John was great. It was just that his greatness, though she admired it, could not compel her affection. Whereas Micky, with his wild ideas, and his eager fumbling, and then at last this play of his, so utterly perfect that she felt he must have achieved it by some curious blind accident. . . .

30

It was nearly two o'clock when they arrived at Sky Peals. John had been busy telephoning from town. He had given orders for this and that, and most of the male staff at Sky Peals were actively engaged in carrying out his instructions when Fran and Michael arrived. Fran said, as she glanced into the dining-room and saw the table: "He's arranged all this for you, Micky." She felt that he had set them a problem and that they must try to solve it. "Go back to town as soon afterwards as you can, and leave me to make all the—the other—arrangements."

"Fran, darling—it's marvellous—to think of it. . . . I can hardly believe it's true. . . ."

"Never mind. . . . Come into the library and wait for John."

John came soon after that. He came like a warrior riding home from victory. He had thought of everything, planned everything, achieved everything; he had even, as a final rare exhilaration, driven himself back from town at nearly fifty miles an hour. Life abounded in every word and movement of him; they had never seen him quite as he was that night. And he said, as he followed them into the dining-room: "I thought this little dinner—or supper—or breakfast—whatever it is—would be rather appropriate. . . . I hope I have composed a meal to your liking."

He had. In the merely culinary sense the meal was perfect. The perfection of it reached the point when eating ceased to be a ministration to carnal appetite and became almost the vehicle of mood and spirit. A curious hunger fastened upon them; a hunger that was poetry rather than prose; Michael exclaimed, delightedly as a child: "Really, John, you *do* know how to do things."

And John answered: "That is the greatest compliment anyone could ever pay me."

They noticed that he ate sparingly himself, and drank more sparingly still. But he talked. They had never heard him talk so calmly, so surely, so unceasingly. His plans, of course. His plans for the play. Michael thought that the critics would damn the things so whole-heartedly that it would hardly survive a second performance. John would not agree. "I know what's going to happen. McGregor of the *Tribune* will pitch in and call your play blasphemous and obscene. . . . Splendid. Nothing could be better. All the critics who think McGregor's an old fogey will rally round to the other side. Then one or two parsons—and with luck a dean or a bishop—will preach a sermon against your absolutely pernicious doctrines. Then some socialist parson down the East End will say he entirely agrees with you, and that your play marks the beginning of

a new relationship between the Church and the Drama. By that time the play will have run a hundred nights, and will be just about getting into its stride. After that—well, it's merely a matter of drawing the receipts and writing another play."

"Another!"

"Yes. Why not? You've got the stuff in you, Michael. I'm convinced of that. . . . Meanwhile, I've arranged several interesting schemes of newspaper propaganda for you—that's one of the advantages of being a large advertiser. Maybe after all, the Savage boot will kick you into fame."

He went on: "Publicity, Michael, is the secret of success. *Any* sort of publicity rather than none at all. . . . If, for instance, you were to manage to kill somebody in a duel, or run off with somebody else's wife—or do anything like that—I assure you it would be an excellent thing for your professional prospects."

. . . . . .

What did he mean by that?

Fran looked at Michael. He was drinking champagne and laughing unrestrainedly at John's witticisms. And John, across the table, was drinking water, and watching Michael with calm, appraising eyes. Always, when John was present, she felt the strain of Michael's hold upon her, as if he were clinging to her tightly, or (perhaps) as if he were struggling with her to escape. She could never feel quite sure which. . . .

But what had John meant?

31

After dinner they went into the library, where a great fire was burning. John was ahead of them, and he did not switch on any of the lights as he entered. But the firelight was blazing

high up the chimney, and the whole room seemed to be dancing, laughing, gesticulating. . . . One of the largest armchairs was drawn up by the fireside; John went to it and stooped down. It was only then that they saw Nan.

Nan. . . . John whispered something to her, and then turned back to meet them.

"Mother came back last night," he announced. "She's very much better . . . and she would insist on getting up to hear about your play, Michael."

He hovered around her like a benign conjurer over his most delicate trick. "Mother, here's Michael. . . ."

She moved in her chair and looked around. The firelight was on her, making her look younger and more beautiful than ever; she looked far more a girl than a woman. She glanced at John, and saw him standing near to her, stooping slightly and smiling. . . . She put her hands on the arms of the chair and began to rise; John took her arm and almost lifted her. She looked older when she was standing, but still far younger than her years. And then she came forward to Michael slowly and deliberately, with John near to her,—almost, but not quite, touching her arm.

She kissed Michael. And then, like the words of a well-learnt school-lesson: "I am so glad your play has been a success, Michael."

Michael said nothing. He smiled uncomfortably and looked at Fran. And Fran said nothing. Only John could speak; he cried, enthusiastically: "I've been telling her all about it, Michael."

He took her again by the arm and led her gently back to the armchair. "Isn't there a difference?" he cried to them. smiling. "Hasn't the change done mother good? And now she's feeling fit for anything. . . . But back she goes to-morrow

to St. Leonard's. This was only a flying visit to see Michael, wasn't it, mother?"

She looked at him and smiled. "I'm tired, John," she whispered, with a brave sadness. "What time is it? *Four?* Why, it's almost day again. . . ."

He put his hand on her shoulder and it seemed as if the merest touch of him gave her instant strength. "All right, mother," he said. "Go to bed now and rest. I'll take you along."

He gave her his arm and they walked slowly across the room towards the door. All the way out into the hall and up the staircase he was talking and laughing and making her talk and laugh with him.

32

When he came down again Michael had put on his overcoat and was ready to go. John was surprised. "But Michael, there's a bed for you. . . . I told Manning . . ."

"Sorry, John, it's awfully good of you, but—I've got various odd jobs to do in town."

"What sort of odd jobs can you do at four in the morning?"

Michael laughed. "Turkish bath, for one thing. Better than sleep. . . . I'll catch the first train at Patchley. And thanks ever so much for having me up here—it's been splendid. . . ."

"If your mind's quite made up, all right. I'd lend you a car if I thought you really knew how to drive one. . . ." He offered his hand. "Good luck, Michael, and don't worry about what the papers say about your play."

Then he turned to Fran. "Fran, you'd better go to bed. I've got some work to do that will keep me for some while. And I think—I think we'll have breakfast at ten . . . and then I'll take mother down to St. Leonards. Good-night."

33

She switched on the electric-fire in her bedroom and sat in front of it, shivering slightly. She felt very tired. Everything for twelve hours had been happening quickly, bewilderingly; there was no keeping pace with it in her mind. Yet there she was again at Sky Peals, and John under the same roof. And tomorrow she would be somewhere—anywhere—miles away—with Michael.

She went to the casement windows that overlooked the gardens and opened them. Almost as she did so, the clock in the belfry chimed the half-hour. She felt more tired than ever, yet she was certain she could not sleep. Far off in the east the dawn just touched the sky like a child's breath on a window-pane. She watched it, shivering in the chill and silent air, and then she heard the first train puffing out of Patchley station in the distance. Michael would be on that train.

She looked below at the dark shrubs of the garden, and the pale things that were flowers; she looked beyond them to the level lawns that John had made, and further still in her own mind to the old meadows that heaved their loveliness to greet the break of day. They lived still, as they had always lived.

When John came up to his room she would tell him, very simply and frankly, what she was going to do. Perhaps it would not be so difficult to tell him. Perhaps he half-guessed already. . . . Two things she saw before her eyes, and both of them as clear as suns—John's greatness and Michael's greatness. All along, ever since her childhood days, those two things had been deepening, strengthening—John's greatness and Michael's greatness. Less of either would have made conflict, but theirs, so frozen and so white-hot, went beyond the point of strife. Michael had won, but so also John had won.

There was no beating John; there was no beating Michael. Even the gulf between them had almost disappeared; it was as if they had scaled the same high summit by different paths.

Sleep, that she had thought would never come to her, came suddenly like a ghost from the meadows of the moon. Was John never going to leave his work? If he delayed much longer, she feared she would fall asleep in the midst of telling him . . . telling him. Yes, she *must* tell him. . . . Or had he come up to his room without her hearing? She went across to the door that connected her room and his, and tried the handle. Locked. . . .

Locked . . . oh, well, of course. . . . Sleep, anyhow. . . . She could tell him in the morning, after breakfast. . . . Sleep . . . the long last day at Sky Peals, and then . . . Micky. . . .

34

When she awoke, the sun was streaming in through the wide-open windows, and she could see from the angle at which it fell that morning was already late. Then she looked at her watch and saw that it was half-past eleven.

She rang and asked why she had not been called earlier. "Sir John said you would be tired," replied the maid. "He gave orders that you were to sleep till you wakened."

She half-smiled. "That's all very well, but I particularly wanted to be up for breakfast."

"There hasn't been any downstairs breakfast this morning, my lady. Mrs. Savage is having it in her room, and Sir John had something in his study before he went out."

"He's out *now*?"

"Yes, my lady. He left in the car about six o'clock."

"I suppose he didn't go to bed at all?"

"I suppose not, my lady."

"Well, *I'll* have breakfast downstairs, anyhow. In the library in about half-an-hour."

She dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. It was extremely unfortunate that John had gone out so early. She had been counting on seeing him at breakfast. But perhaps he had gone out on farm business, as he sometimes did on fine mornings, and in any case, he had promised to take Nan down to St. Leonards.

During breakfast Manning gave her further details. "Sir John insisted on me going to bed, my lady, and told me that if he wasn't here by noon, Martin was to take Mrs. Savage down to St. Leonards without him."

In a queer sort of way she felt angry with John for being absent and thereby upsetting her plans. Noon came and still he did not come. She went down to the garages and found Martin preparing the Daimler limousine. But Martin had received his orders through Manning, and knew no more than she did when John would be back. "But I daresay, my lady, he went to the tannery and won't return till evening."

There was nothing to do but to go back to the house and help Nan to prepare for the journey. Nan was childishly disappointed that John was not to accompany her. Fran talked to her for a while before the car started, and Martin was slightly late, so that it was after one before she could attend to the urgent details of her own affairs. The first, of course, was a letter to John. If he did not come, she must write to him.

35

She went to her room and wrote:

DEAR JOHN,—

I wanted to tell you this if you had been here: I hate having to write it. But there's no alternative now. I have an idea you won't be very

surprised to hear that I'm going away with Micky. That's all. I don't think it's any use trying to explain to you why; you probably wouldn't understand. Don't think this has all happened very suddenly; I've been thinking about it, in my own mind, for a long while. The fact is, Micky needs me, and can't do without me, whereas you are far too strong to need anything or anybody. I haven't a word of complaint to make against you, John, and I respect and admire you more than anybody else in the world, even than Micky. But that isn't enough for people who are married.

I hate to think of all the business and social difficulties that this may bring on you. But you've faced worse difficulties, I daresay, and, in any case, there are times when one has to think beyond such things. Micky and I will help you all we can if you wish to get a divorce.

This sounds to me rather a cruel letter as I read it over. But it isn't meant to be. In many ways, John, I am very sorry to leave you; you have always been wonderfully kind to me, and if you had really loved me as Micky does it might have been different. May you find somewhere and somehow the great happiness you deserve. FRAN.

She sealed and addressed the envelope and then gave it to one of the gardeners to take down to the tannery immediately. "And if Sir John has gone on from there to St. Leonards," she added, "you had better re-address it and send it on by express post."

Perhaps it was reaction after the previous day's excitement that made her a little sad during the afternoon. The weather was perfect, and never had Sky Peals seemed so beautiful. Robbins, seeing her alone on the terrace, seized the opportunity of making few friendly remarks about the garden. "We shall have some lovely roses this year," he said, "if the greenfly don't get at them. Sir John's favourite flower, roses is."

36

Somehow the work of preparation, which had at first seemed so great, was very quickly and easily done. She could tell her maid to pack her bags for an absence of some considerable

time; and she could instruct Fellowes, Martin's assistant, to have a car ready for six o'clock. "I'm going away this evening, and I want you to get me to Victoria Station by a quarter to seven."

"Certainly, my lady. The Daimler is out, but there is the Wolseley or the Sunbeam."

"The Wolseley will do. . . . There is some luggage, also, if you will collect it from the housekeeper's room."

"Certainly, my lady."

How easy it all was! Fellowes would drive her to Victoria, the luggage would be given in charge of a porter, Fellowes would return, knowing nothing, not even expecting to know anything. All the servants knew that she and John lived more or less independent lives, travelling where and when and as often as they liked, yet remaining always perfectly cordial and friendly.

Tea in the library . . . the last tea. She lingered over it till half-past five, reading the criticisms of Michael's play in most of the morning papers. She had glanced at them before, but this was her first chance of studying them carefully. Some were favourable, some unfavourable; none was merely middling. McGregor, in the *Tribune,* had lashed into it as he had promised; but his lashing incited rather than appeased a curiosity to see the play. On the whole Michael could not grumble at his "press." On the whole, Michael could not grumble . . . now . . . at anything. . . . Towards six she went up to her room and gathered together a few of her more intimate personal possessions. Those would go into a small hand-bag. Also, of course, there was money. She did not know how much Micky would bring with him. It was probably the last thing of all that he would think about.

Almost at the minute of six, and she heard Fellowes driving

the car up to the porch, the telephone summoned her again. "Mr. Hicks calling from the tannery, my lady."

Hicks was John's secretary. "Hello. . . . Is that Lady Savage? . . . Ah yes, so sorry to trouble you, Lady Savage, but is Sir John at home? . . . No? . . . Maybe, of course, he's gone down to St. Leonards; I'll get a trunk-call there as soon as I can. . . . The fact is, he left the tannery in his car about two hours ago. . . . Well, you see, he left no message where he was going, which is rather unusual of him . . . and there were one or two important matters—an important interview, in fact—which he has missed. . . . Rather unusual, you see, so I thought I'd ring you up. . . . You say you sent him a letter by hand this afternoon? . . . Hold on a moment and I'll enquire. . . . Hello again. . . . Yes, a man brought a letter about three o'clock, just before Sir John left. One of the clerks gave it to him. . . . All right, I'll try St. Leonards next. Of course it's quite possible that he was tired after last night. . . . By the way, if you should see Mr. Michael, please convey him my best congratulations. . . . Yes. . . . Good-bye. . . .

Manning was holding open the front-door.

"The car is ready, my lady. I understand that you will not be back for some time. . . ."

"I expect not, Manning. Is all the luggage in the car?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Good-night. . . ."

"Good-night, my lady."

As the car passed the lodge gates and swung into the high road, is occurred to her that Hicks was probably right in his surmise that John had gone down to St. Leonards. Of course John might have been somewhat perturbed after reading her letter. That was only to be expected. It was absurd to pretend that such a vital business as hers could be effected without inconvenience to somebody.

CHAPTER SIX

FRAN AND JOHN

1

WHAT impressed her most (and almost, in its own peculiar way, fascinated her), was the extraordinary ease with which everything was accomplished. She reached Victoria at the appointed hour, dismissed Fellowes, made arrangements about her luggage, and was talking to Michael within a few moments. She had, as she first spoke to him, a curious feeling that everybody *must* know, could not help knowing at a glance, that they were wife and "the other man" preparing to elope. It almost piqued her to see that nobody betrayed the slightest curiosity about them, and it piqued her still more to reflect that there was nobody, even among their friends, who would have guessed the truth. If Hicks, for instance, or Martin or any of the servants, were to see her standing there with Michael, what would they conclude? Probably that the pair of them were off to St. Leonards to see John and Nan.

She looked at Michael half-humorously. He was "the other man." Had there ever been an "other man" like him? He did not do anything that "other men" might be expected to do; he did not grip her hand with furtive passion, or show any feeling of ecstasy at his position. On the contrary, he

seemed just slightly embarrassed even, perhaps, peeved. Let's hurry along on to the train, Fran," he exclaimed. "These crowds. . . . Oh, how I loathe crowds. . . . They always make me feel I haven't got a chance."

"But where are we going, Micky? I don't even know that."

"Neither do I. But I've booked for Paris. Paris is on the way to most places."

"And then?"

"Oh, anywhere . . . everywhere . . . Southwards . . . Sunwards. Rome . . . Sicily . . . Egypt . . ."

"It sounds a little vague."

"*Vague?* Is *is* vague. All wide horizons are vague. To plan things spoils them. And you've had enough of plans, I should think, to last you a lifetime."

"What time does the train start, anyway?"

"In about ten minutes. We've got reserved seats."

She said then: "If you'll wait here, I'd just like to telephone for a moment."

Five minutes later they went onto the train. It was not till they were both cosily settled in the first-class Pullman that she remarked: "Oh, by the way, Micky, I don't know where on earth John's got to. He left the tannery this afternoon without telling anybody, and he hasn't gone either home or to St. Leonards."

"How do you know?"

"I just 'phoned the tannery. They've been trying to get in touch with him because of some important business."

"Perhaps his car's broken down."

"Yes, of course . . . it might be that. . . ."

2

And so began the adventure that was to lead them anywhere . . . everywhere. They did not talk much during the train

journey to Newhaven; Micky still seemed embarrassed, and only fitfully discussed his play, for which, he said, the bookings had already been encouraging. The sea-passage to Dieppe was roughish, and Fran, who was not a good sailor, stayed down in her cabin trying to sleep.

It was raining when they reached the St. Lazare terminus. Micky had no idea where to go; to the taxi-driver he remarked, as airily as his bad French would allow him: "Hotel—un bon hotel." The driver took them to the most distant hotel he could think of—one in the Place de la République. The breakfast, however, was quite good, and afterwards they sat in the lounge discussing what was to be done. Extraordinary, really, that the matter needed discussing. "I suggest Rome," Micky said. "If we leave by the night express we can be there by to-morrow evening."

She shook her head. "I'd rather not have any more night journeys for a while, Micky."

"All right." He laughed a trifle nervously. "I'd better go and see what they can do for us here, then."

She stayed in the lounge while he went to the bureau to make arrangements. When he came back he dragged a chair next to hers, lit a cigarette, and said, rather shyly: "It's all settled, Fran. . . . But—there's one thing—just one thing. . . ."

She had never loved him quite so tenderly, and, above all, so calmly, as she did then, when she learned what that one thing was. He seemed to her only a boy, and his shyness and puzzlement a boy's. A curious amazement possessed her when she thought of their situation; she felt they were more like son and mother than lovers. And then, to make the unreal seem more unreal, he told her, as if he were confessing a misdeed, that he had booked separate rooms. He blamed the hotel at first, and then, when she looked at him, admitted that he had done so

intentionally. She made him try to tell her why—again like a mother exacting a full confession. And—with his hand trembling on her arm the whole time—he said vague things that reminded her of the time when John had tried to extract from him a clear statement about his Institute. Of course, it was hopeless to expect a clear statement from Micky. His mind was like a whirlpool from which he was always trying to rescue something. All he could say was that he hated "planning things." There had been times . . . in the meadows of the moon, for instance . . . and there might be times still. . . . He dived into the whirlpool and brought up two phrases— "in some sunlit orchard" and "under the desert stars"; he kept repeating them, as if they explained more and more each time. Then he stared round the hotel lounge and looked like a child about to cry. "Not here, Fran . . . in this sort of a place." He added, restlessly: "Oh, let's not trouble about what we're going to do or where we're going to go, or anything. We'll stay in Paris till we're tired of it—then we'll go on to Rome, Brussels, Madrid—anywhere. . . . And we'll do just what we feel we want to do."

She felt her eyes brim over suddenly with tears.

"All right, Micky."

"You *do* understand me, Fran?"

She answered softly: "Yes, I do. Better than you understand yourself."

3

They hired a car and drove out through Bougival and St. Germain-en-laye to Poissy. Here they lunched, and spent the afternoon in the woods. The rain had stopped, and the sun shone warmly; Micky was very happy. He hated museums and picture-galleries and churches and show-places of all kinds, but he loved woods.

They went back for tea to St. Germain, and it was while they were sitting in the sunlight outside the café that a newspaper-seller, guessing their nationality, offered them an English *Tribune*. Micky bought it, but did not look at it; nor was it until they were on the point of leaving that Fran took it, glanced at the front page, and exclaimed under her breath: "Micky . . . There's something in here—about John . . . about John. . . . Oh, Micky—Micky——"

He leaned over her shoulder and they read together. There was a headline: "Strange Adventure of Rich Man," and a sub-headline: "Sir John Savage Found in Rolls-Royce on Lonely Hill-Top." The news had apparently come in late, and was necessarily bare of details. It merely stated that Sir John Savage had been found about midnight on a hill near Fovant, in Wiltshire. "Shortly after eleven o'clock, in the midst of a heavy rain, the villagers were astonished to see the glare of motor-headlights on the high ridge of hills that overlook them. For over half-an-hour the lights moved about, facing one direction after another, until at last a few men, fearing that something was wrong, made the sharp ascent to the top of the ridge. Here, not far from the edges of a steep cliff-face, they found a Rolls-Royce car, and in the driving-seat a well-dressed man who was unable to give any account of himself. Documents in his possession, however, established him to be Sir John Savage, the well-known manufacturer. He was taken down to the village, where he was found to be seriously ill."

4

They did not speak for a while. Then he summoned the waiter. "You must have a drink—whiskey or something . . ." he told her. "This—this is a great shock. . . . You're quite pale."

The waiter came and he gave his order. Afterwards Fran said: "It's strange. . . . I can hardly believe it. . . . It's so unlike John to do dramatic things like—like getting lost on a hill—and—and not knowing who he is. . . ."

The waiter returned and Michael poured her out a stiff whiskey and soda. "Drink this. . . . You'll feel better then. . . . I wonder what made him go to—to—what was the name of the place?"

"Probably he didn't know where he was going."

"Sort of—sort of breakdown?"

"Perhaps."

"Last thing you'd ever expect John to have."

"Yes."

"Overwork, do you think?"

"Possibly."

"He's had rather a busy time lately, hasn't he? With the tannery strike, and then that play business. . . ."

"And all the worry of Nan as well."

"Yes, of course."

She added, after a pause: "And now—all the worry of—of *me*."

"Oh, *that*? You think *that*?"

"Well, it's rather likely, isn't it?"

5

Of course, she reasoned, if you leave a husband you must expect him to be temporarily upset about it. That was assuming that John's illness had had anything at all to do with her leaving him—she had no right to be sure that it had. There was no doubt that he *had* been overworking—with his innumerable plans and schemes and campaigns for this, that, and the other. It was his own fault, she felt at first; he had spent

too much time in his office and in his study at home. How ironical that at the very moment of his success there should come this sudden, unlooked-for failure!

Unfortunately, his illness would be serious to others besides himself. There was Nan. . . . What would Nan do? And the tannery? And the farms? What an extraordinary number of things depended upon the health of one man! And he himself . . . she was sorry he was ill. Somehow she could not imagine him being ill. Illness and John seemed almost a contradiction in terms; she had never known him to be even slightly indisposed throughout all the years she had lived with him. She hoped he would be better soon.

Michael said, as they were on the way back to Paris: "You know, Fran, I'm damned sorry about John. He's been awfully decent to me . . . and I can't stand the thought of him being ill in some God-forsaken village with nobody to look after him."

"He'll have somebody to look after him, Micky."

"Nurses, I suppose?"

"Yes . . . yes. . . . I suppose so. . . ."

She had tried not to think that the matter would be serious enough for nurses. . . .

. . . . . .

It was not till dusk was falling, and they were driving across the wide spaces of the Place de la Concorde, that he said: "I daresay there'll be some more news about him in the papers to-morrow." And as soon as he said it a sort of terror came over her! she felt that she could not bear an endless succession of to-morrows in which she would read about the progress of John's illness in newspapers.

6

During dinner she asked him where he thought of going on the morrow. He said: "I wish you'd come to Rome with me. I believe you'd like Rome far better than Paris."

"You said, Mickey, that we should go just where we felt like going."

"So we shall. And *I* feel like Rome. But I don't mind really where we go. You choose somewhere. Where do *you* feel like going?"

Hardly till that moment did she really know what was in her mind. It was the word "Rome" that told her. She said, leaning across the table: "Not Rome for me, Micky . . . but *home.*"

"Home?" He whispered the word. "Do you mean Sky Peals?"

"Yes . . . in a way. . . ."

There was a long silence, and then he said: "You'd really like me to go and see John, wouldn't you? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Micky. . . ." She could not say more than that.

He said: *"I* thought of it straight away, but I wondered whether you wouldn't care to. . . ."

7

After the decision to go back, there could be no advantage in delay. They intended to leave by the next morning boat, but while they were having coffee Fran asked if it were possible to go that night. It was, by means of a terrific rush, and they made the rush, and were driving back along the Boulevard des Italiens by eight-thirty. They had just five minutes to spare before the departure of the boat train at St. Lazare. Everything happened with a cinematograph swiftness. She

had hardly time to think, and yet, in a sort of way, it was as if she were thinking all the time. Micky, after two successive nights without sleep, was a miracle of wakefulness; he even tried to talk to her all the way to Dieppe. She wondered if he were fearfully disappointed at the sudden cancellation of their plans, and then there came to her the curious idea that he wasn't somehow disappointed at all, that there had been no plans, that the whole business had been nothing but a wild idea of his—the sort of idea he *would* have. . . . Through the semi-coma of advancing sleep she heard him chattering to her, just as he had always chattered, eagerly, rapturously, plunging from one subject to another. How young he was; in some ways he had never been anything but a boy. . . . She closed her eyes and felt him near to her with the comfort of a mother sleeping beside her child. Then she suddenly opened her eyes and said to him: "Micky, you aren't angry because I'm going back to John, are you? After all, you know why. . . . If he's ill, he must have somebody to help him. . . . And then there's Nan . . . and the firm . . . and—oh, everything. . . ."

He answered: "Yes, John *does* rather matter, doesn't he? That's the worst of being such a big gun in the world—when you do come a cropper there's such a hell of a smash-up, isn't there? . . . But *me,* on the other hand—*I* simply *couldn't* hurt myself by a fall—I've nowhere to fall to. And if *I* were to drive a car up a hill and lose myself on top, nobody would be in the least surprised."

She smiled. "Micky, you're a wonderful person. I always thought it was I who'd be helping you . . . but now you're helping me."

. . . . . .

Dieppe, Newhaven, London, Salisbury. . . .

. . . . . .

How extraordinary that fate should lead them to this odd little village! Its very name was odd—Fovant. . . . Fran had been repeating the name to herself till it sounded incredible. Yet when she saw it, it seemed miraculously appropriate—a haven of peace upon this Sunday noontide. The sunlight drenched the clustered roofs, and far beyond them lay the green ridge of the hills.

They called at the inn and made inquiries. John, they learned, had been taken to the house of a local gentleman, Mr. Fenwick. The house was a mile out of the village, and the innkeeper volunteered to go with them and show them the way. He had been one of the party that had found John, and during the short drive he managed to tell his story graphically. "We saw them great headlights starin' at us from the hills, an' then movin' and swingin' round like as if they didn't know where they were. . . . There's a track along the top stretched right the way from Salisbury, and that's ahow the gentleman must have come along it. It's supposed to be an old Roman road. . . . Drenched to the skin 'e was, when we found 'im. . . ."

Fenwick's house was small, compact, and dignified, and Fenwick himself was rather like his house. He greeted Fran and Michael warmly. "We expected you, of course," he told Fran, "though when I telephoned to your house they couldn't tell me your address. . . . No, I shouldn't claim to be a friend of Sir John's, but we are business acquaintances, and I was glad to be of any service. . . ." He gave her a slow, sad smile and turned to Michael. "And this is Sir John's brother? Ah, I know—the playwright. . . ."

They thought it wiser (both Fran and Michael) that only she should see John for the present. And in this the doctor, a Salisbury man of some repute, entirely concurred; indeed he would not permit even Fran to stay more than ten minutes.

8

Michael, waiting in the drawing-room, slept during those ten minutes. He was at last, after three days and three nights of nearly complete wakefulness, overwhelmingly tired. Fran had difficulty in rousing him when she came back from the room where John was.

She was very pale, but there was a new firmness in her voice when she spoke. "Come out for a walk, Micky," she said. "I want to talk to you."

They went out of the house and down the drive into the sunlit lane. Everywhere there lay the drowsy Sunday stillness, with no sound save the distant tinkle of sheep-bells on the hills.

All she said at first was: "Micky, I shall have to stay with him."

"Of course. . . ." he said sleepily. "Of course. . . ."

She was glad he was so sleepy. It seemed to make it easier for her to talk to him. She went on, after a pause: "He didn't know me, Micky, when I spoke to him—he was in a sort of delirium and they wouldn't let me stay. . . . But he was talking —constantly talking—and it was all—everything he said—about Nan—and you—and—and me. . . .

"Micky, we haven't understood him. I don't believe he was the least bit worried by the tannery business or the play—he takes all those things in his stride—he loves the difficulties that would worry most people. But these human things. . . . We never thought he was very fond of us, did we, Micky? Did *you?* But he *is* . . . he *is* . . . and because he never talked about it, we didn't realize it. . . . Just think how we've all been against him—Nan for a while, and you and Peter, and then me —even me. . . . But now—oh, we *must* help him, Micky. . . .

"I love you so much, Micky, and so differently from the

way I love John. . . . Yes, I *do* love him . . . I didn't realize it till I saw him lying there ill and needing me."

He gripped her arm with a sudden tightness and said: "John's won . . . but I don't mind. Besides, I'm nearly as fond of him as I am of you."

"And you *will* help me, Micky?"

He gave her that dazzling, unforgettable smile which, even with its touch of weariness, was still the symbol of all that was noblest in him, and of all that she had most loved. "What can I do?" he cried eagerly. "I'll do *anything*, if you'll only tell me before I fall asleep. . . ."

He was almost, at that moment, falling asleep as he walked.

. . . . . .

She sent him back to Salisbury in the hired car, with orders to proceed from there to St. Leonards. He was to stay with Nan, and make up any story he liked to account for John's absence. Whatever happened, Nan must not know of John's breakdown. . . . And then there was Sky Peals and the tannery and the farms. . . . "Till John's better," she said, "you'll have to work harder than you've ever worked in your life. . . ."

9

There came the moment when John first knew her, whispered her name, and touched her hand.

Then came the day when, secure amongst furs and cushions, he made the long journey from Fovant to Sky Peals, with Fran beside him in the car, and Martin at the wheel. Fran thought the journey would have tired him, but at Sky Peals, as Martin helped him out of the car, he said, more brightly than he had yet spoken; "How are you, Martin? . . . I've been ill, but I'm getting better now. Thank you for bringing me so comfortably."

And in the hall he insisted on shaking hands with Manning. "How are you, Manning? . . . I've been ill, but I'm getting better now."

Slowly the threads of life came back into his hands, and he held them fast. He asked about Michael, insisted on his coming to Sky Peals, would not dream of bothering about the past. So there came also the moment when the two men (but one of them only a boy) stood together in the old library where so many things had happened, and shook hands together. And Michael said: "Well, John, the play's not doing so badly. And you're making exactly twice as much out of it every night as I am . . ."

John said: "Good. . . . Good. . . . Well, I took the risk, you know, didn't I?"

. . . John's greatness and Michael's greatness. Less of either would have made conflict, but theirs, so frozen and so white-hot, went beyond the point of strife. John had won, but so also Michael had won. . . .

John would not meet Nan till he was sure she would see no difference in him. He kept writing her letters and sending them to the firm's travellers to post in various part of the Continent. And when at last she did come he greeted her with something like his old smiling eagerness. "I'm really very fit, mother," he told her, "but just a little tired after my long travels."

10

Last of all, there came the moment when she knew he was better. It was autumn, and they were walking, as they often did, over the lawns where formerly had been the meadows. And he said to her suddenly: "It was losing you that I couldn't stand. I didn't know that you mattered so much to me. . . . Damned dangerous, really, you know, being in your

power like that. And what's going to happen when I'm completely well? Do you think you'll leave me again?"

She answered: "Not now I know how weak you are. Micky's managing to do without me far better than you can."

"But I'm not weak. I'm getting stronger every day. And I'm tired of having Hicks up here to tell me what's happening. I think I'll go down to the tannery to-morrow morning . . . and without warning 'em. Give them all the shock of their lives."

They walked a little way in silence, till at last he remarked: "You're very quiet, Fran. What's worrying you?"

She answered: "I was thinking of the old meadows that used to be here—and what they have seen. . . . Nan and Peter . . . and then Micky and me . . . and now you and me. . . . And—I was thinking how much I love you, John."

He seemed at first embarrassed by the sudden intimacy of her words, and then, holding her closely to him, whispered her name and led her back to the house.

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